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ROBERT BRIDGES

1844-1930

HERBERT BRIDGES

1844—1930

BY

EDWARD THOMPSON

Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford

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PREFACE

IN October 1944, it will be a century since Robert Bridges was born. He was close on sixty when Queen Victoria died but lived on well into our own day. The time seems ripe for an attempt to assess his work and to gather up some of Oxford's rich 'oral tradition' concerning him. I have suppressed his most incisive comments on contemporary poets, reluctantly because they were illuminating, but have tried to keep enough of my memories of him to convey a little of the vivid impression he made. Some personal detail is justified, I feel, in the case of a poet so great and a man so loved and admired.

His friend Mr. Kenneth Sisam saw a brief introduction which I wrote to the 'Augustan' selection from Bridges's verse, and asked me to undertake a fuller study. He has helped me with information and criticism. To its great gain, while I was awaiting an operation Sir Humphrey Milford took off my hands the burden of reading over my first draft. My wife, as always, saved me from mistakes of more kinds than one. I have not cared to trouble the poet's family, who have no responsibility for anything in this book, but I trust that our old friendship will win forgiveness for error and inadequacy. For the faults which remain I hope that the fact that I had to write under pressure, doubtful if I should ever be able to finish, may ask some indulgence.

Scarcity of paper in wartime has denied me a separate page for a dedication. But I am allowed to set here the inscription

To
DR. THOMAS JONES, C.H.
in friendship

E. T.

Oriel College, Oxford
16 May 1944

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I

INTRODUCTION

IT was Robert Bridges's wish that no biography of him should be written, and the wish will be respected by all who enjoyed his friendship. But some personal narrative is necessary, to bring out the background of an art which was of exceptional integrity, with nothing of schism between the man and his work. Also, of those who saw him often in his last days, apart from his family few now remain; the privilege was mine because of neighbourhood. I can therefore gather up some of my memories while discussing his writing; 'those who admire or love a poet's work are instinctively drawn to the man, and are eager to learn anything that may deepen their intimacy.'¹

Robert Seymour Bridges was born 23 October 1844, at Walmer, in Kent, a county where his people had been 'substantial yeomen' ever since the early sixteenth century. They had become rather more than this. They were of the country gentry, a class below the highest class of all only because they chose to consider themselves below it, and with extensive affiliations running into that class. Bridges throughout life, as he acknowledged repeatedly, was fortunate, and his youth was spent in 'days that seemed to the younger generation to have been unusually supplied with a dignified and long-lived aristocracy of generals, baronets and divines, whose features were familiar to me among the many miniatures, silhouettes and other little portraits, mementos of personal affection, that hung in my mother's rooms, and in their eighteenth-century fashions, kindled our imaginations of a strange and remote world'.² His father was John Thomas Bridges, of St. Nicholas Court, Isle of Thanet. His mother, Harriet Elizabeth, was the third daughter of the Rev. Sir Robert Affleck, who in 1833 had succeeded his cousin as baronet and settled at Dalham Hill, Suffolk.

Robert Bridges's local patriotism was always strong, the springs of his life and work. After he was appointed Poet Laureate, in 1913, among many ill-informed critics a prominent journalist made himself outstanding, in a weekly column which he signed 'Man of Kent'. Bridges was not in the least ruffled by what were extremely foolish comments but chanced to wonder who 'Man of Kent' was. There was no mystery and

¹ *Selected Poems of R. W. Dixon*, p. x.

² *Poems of Dolben*, pp. x-xi.

I told him. The information stuck; Bridges, who had not previously heard of his assailant, tracked him down in a reference book and discovered that he was an Aberdonian. 'Are you *sure* that "Man of Kent" is Robertson Nicoll?' he asked. This was the only fact that interested Bridges, and it interested him deeply. 'What makes it worse is that I myself am a man of Kent.' He thought it iniquitous that an Aberdonian should have the effrontery to style himself a 'Man of Kent'—Kent the oldest of Saxon counties, the closest of all to the still older civilization of the Continent, and in its landscape, and even to some extent in its trees and flowers, still apart from all the rest of the counties.

It was on the Kentish downs that his first vision of England, that which was to go deepest and stay longest, came to the poet. Like Kent, he himself was 'merc English', English of the English. Lying on the springy turf, he could watch the unique and tremendous naval life of his land go past. Bridges's memories always had an atmosphere of peculiar clarity and intimacy. 'The Summer House on the Mound' recalls the intensity of delight with which the boy watched the ships come up the Channel. In an image which to me recalls Shakespeare's majestic sleep-walking 'murderess queen' he tells how he saw Napier's fleet on its way to the Baltic, in the Crimean War:

Cloudless the sky and ~~calm~~ and blue the sea,
As round Saint Margaret's cliff mysteriously,
Those murderous queens walking in Sabbath sleep
Glided in line upon the ~~windless~~ deep.

The Cinque Ports were near, and the Warden of those Ports, the Duke of Wellington, was a friend of the family; Bridges remembered how every Sunday in church he would pause by their pew, to bow to the poet's mother. Later (he tells us, in a passage which closes in a line that is not one of his happiest) Bridges saw

his castle-flag to fall half-mast
One morn as I sat looking on the sea,
When thus all England's grief first came to me,
Who hold my childhood favour'd that I knew
So well the face that won at Waterloo.

The Bridges' house was set in walks and gardens such as the country gentry used to gather about themselves. The boy cherished both the simplicities of sky and sea, their varying clouds and vast of labouring waters, and the nearer intimacies of queenly sycamore and groves of lime, 'the summer haunt of bees'. No man who has used our tongue has loved better or more felicitously described the ~~downland~~ scene, the orchard and

ordered coppice, and even in old age he regretted that the home he remembered so well had passed to doubtless holier but different possessors:

The year that Napier sail'd, my years were ten—
Yea, and new homes and loves my heart hath found:
A priest has there usurped the ivied mound,
The bell that call'd to horse calls now to prayers,
And silent nuns tread the familiar stairs.
Within the peach-clad walls that old outlaw,
The Roman wolf, scratches with privy paw.

In the texture of its colour and emotion Bridges's poetry was almost written for him in the recollections of these earliest years, on a tapestry of gracious and stately natural beauty.

He was the fourth son and the eighth child of a family of nine. In his tenth year his father died; this did not affect the children's fortunes, as the family property had come to John Bridges—Robert Bridges was never under any necessity to earn his living. His mother married again, a year later, and moved from Kent to Rochdale Vicarage. In September 1854, Robert, nearly ten, went to Eton.

At Eton, as through life, he had the normal attitude to normal things; the unusual or unorthodox hardly existed for him. As always, however, this attitude was saved from conventional acceptance by his peculiarly personal fastidiousness of judgement. Bridges loved, and indeed idealized Eton; he cherished no unhappy memories, he made friends who remained friends throughout life, he enjoyed the river and playing-grounds. In his last year he was in the Oppidans' and field elevens.

He was a good cricketer and oarsman. He once told me—as a matter of information and with no sort of grudge—that he missed his school flannels for cricket, solely because the captain disliked him. This kind of thing does happen, not with school elevens only, and it happens oftener than people are willing to believe.

Bridges was chiefly a batsman, of the imperious aggressive kind. Once, indignant at being dismissed first ball, 'Knock that fellow off!' he told his successor. 'And I'm glad to remember that he did it!' He himself bowled, but only occasionally, sometimes by his own request. He used to recall with relish an occasion when, after studying a sticky batsman⁹ with some care, he asked to be allowed 'to have a go at him'. 'I saw the sort of fellow he was. So I sent down a ball on the leg, and as soon as it left my hand I rushed for all I was worth and I caught him off it at square leg.' I think we may take it that Robert Bridges was a slow bowler (or a very fast runner).

His interest in cricket lasted, though he did not follow first-class

cricket. When he was over eighty, as dusk fell and I was coming from practice at the nets of the Boar's Hill team, whose ground was on Sir Arthur Evans's estate at Youldbury, adjacent to Robert Bridges's grounds, I sometimes found him watching us and the evening. The picture has stayed in my mind, of his silent vigil as he watched younger men:

Who goes there? God knows. I'm nobody. How should I answer?
Can't jump over a gate nor run across the meadow.
I'm but an old whitebeard of inane identity. Pass on!
What's left of me to-day will very soon be nothing.¹

I have spoken of his love for Eton; no school has shown a greater power of holding its sons' enthusiasm through later life. Bridges's loyalties were absolute. He never forgot a friend and I doubt if he ever lost a friend.

But no friendship ever went deeper than the one he formed at school with a boy four years younger and destined to die in his teens. Here is Bridges held, thirty years later, as others of us have been held, by a picture which has suddenly brought the years flooding back on memory. I give the whole passage, as an example of his prose, so flawlessly written to achieve its full purpose, and as a mirror of his own exceptional simplicity and modesty of spirit.

I had not visited Eton for many years, when one day passing from the Fellows' Library into the Gallery I caught sight of the portrait of my school-friend Digby Dolben hanging just without the door among our most distinguished contemporaries. I was wholly arrested, and as I stood gazing on it, my companion asked me if I knew who it was. I was thinking that, beyond a few whom I could name, I must be almost the only person who would know. Far memories of my boyhood were crowding freshly upon me: he was standing again beside me in the eager promise of his youth; I could hear his voice; nothing of him was changed; while I, wrapt from him in a confused mist of time, was wondering what he would think, could he know that at this actual moment he would have been dead thirty years, and that his memory would be thus preserved and honoured in the beloved school, where his delicate spirit had been so strangely troubled.

Bridges left three masterpieces of shorter biography and literary criticism combined: his *Memoirs of Dolben*, *Bradley*, and *Canon Dixon*. He was singularly uninterested in his own personality, and not the least—perhaps, indeed, the chief—value of these beautiful studies is their revelation of the man who was standing apart, closely watching his subject yet casting the shadow of his own mind while he watched.

He tells us that he himself was 'in some fractional part a Dolben'; the

¹ *October and Other Poems*, p. 16.

friends shared a common great-grandmother. Through his mother he was related also to the Mackworth ancestry of Digby Mackworth Dolben. They could call each other cousin; but, though their sisters were intimate, had never met until the younger boy came to Eton in January 1862. 'As I happened to be captain of the house, I was able without inconvenience to discharge those duties of elder relative which are so specially obnoxious to Eton boys. I enrolled Dolben among my fags, and looked after him.'

Soon, however, it was the younger boy who was treated as if elder and maturer. 'Our meetings were therefore generally after lock-up, when if we both had work to do, he would sometimes bring his to my room, but more often I would go uninvited to sit with him.' They were both of them 'terribly serious, determined, and of artistic bent, and had come through the same sort of home-teaching to the same mental perplexity'. Neither doubted that he would become a priest or monk. 'A sectarian training had provided us with premisses, which, so long as they remained unquestioned, were of overwhelming significance: they dominated everything . . . the ordinary conventions of life were to us merely absurd.' Both were Puseyites. In later years, Bridges moved so far away from all this that he found himself puzzled as to 'how I had first come to imbibe these notions'. He ascribed them to Keble's *Christian Year*, 'a book regarded in my family as good poetry, and given to us on Sundays to learn by heart'.

Bridges went up to Oxford, October 1863, and joined Corpus Christi College. He stroked the Corpus boat in 1867, when it was second on the river, and again in the regatta at Paris that summer, when he 'had to make a dramatic choice between stroking his college boat or stroking that of his old school. He naturally refused to desert the former, and heroically lost to the old Etonians by half a length'.¹

He had been expecting Dolben to join him at Oxford that autumn, but while he was thus 'engaged, much against my natural inclinations, in an eight-oared race on the Seine', Dolben was drowned. All their hopes and plans were scattered. It is true that the elder was 'drifting fast away from our old religious sympathies'. But, Bridges says (and the habit of his whole life, so rooted in integrity of personal relationship, makes this certain), the difference could not have affected their friendship. Over forty years later, Bridges gathered up his recollections, in his flawless Introduction to Dolben's Poems.

Affection made him indulgent; *The Spirit of Man* contains some very ordinary verses by Dolben. Nevertheless, the poems justify the pains that

¹ *The Times* (article by Nowell C. Smith), 22 April 1930.

he took, for amid much indifferent work there are the fiery splendour and colour of 'Sing me the men ere this' and those poignant and perfect lyrics, 'Enough' and 'The world is young to-day'. Yet Dolben's certainty of fame is not in his own work, so quickly ended, but in the memoir which has brought back the sunny youth that he shared with his friend and kinsman.

This was a time of intense suffering. Over a year before Dolben's untimely death, in February 1866, Bridges's younger brother Edward died, which 'plunged me into deep sorrow . . . and considerably altered the hopes and prospects of my life'.

Since this study intends to omit all that is biographical, unless it illustrates the poet's personality or work, or comes under the head of essential outline and framework, I pass over the external events of the next few years. In them he did what was his only extensive touring of foreign countries: he travelled in Egypt and Syria and the Netherlands, he spent eight months in Germany and a winter in Paris. In Germany he was accompanied by William Sanday, for whom his affection was deep. In 1914, when we sat side by side in the chapel of Lincoln College, Oxford, Bridges began suddenly to talk of Sanday, who was engaged in some theological controversy which to his friend seemed unimportant. 'They're having a fight in a cupboard. They've left the cupboard door open. But it's a fight in a cupboard, all the same.' He pondered deeply in silence, then said with strong tenderness, 'He's a most delightful creature'. Bridges's head was away from me and I was not sure (though, I admit, I was almost sure) that I had heard him rightly. I asked, 'Did you say he was a delightful *preacher*?' 'No', said Bridges slowly, turning towards me reproachfully, 'I said *creature*. I trust I did *not* say *creechur*!'¹

In 1874, Bridges toured Italy. After this, he had, as it were, almost finished with Europe, and was to keep to his own country, except for the most occasional lapses (including, late in life, his celebrated visit to the university of Michigan).

Meanwhile, his professional life had begun. In November 1869, he entered St. Bartholomew's Hospital as a student, with the intention to practise medicine until he was forty, when he would retire; the experience would give him knowledge of men for his work as a poet. He graduated M.B., 1874, and in 1878 became Assistant Physician to the Hospital for

¹ It was on this occasion that he told me (having brought me there to show me a memorial to John Wesley which he thought would interest me), 'You know I know nothing about Wesleyanism!' I said that I knew this. 'How did you know it?' 'Well, you pronounce it Wesleyanism.' 'What *should* it be?' 'Wesleyanism.' (After a few moments' thought) 'I see. As if it were a double s.' 'Yes. I suppose it is compensation for the shortening from its original form, of Wellesley, to Wesley.'

Sick Children, Great Ormond Street; from here he went to the Great Northern Hospital, Holloway.

Because of this experience, in later life, when he had become famous as a poet he was always styled 'Dr.' He told me that he detested this and preferred to be 'Mr.' He scarcely ever referred to his professional life, but had one or two stories which amused him. One he used in print, to illustrate pronunciation or, rather, mispronunciation: that of the cockney who saw on his medicine chart the words *ter die*, and fled in terror to escape his scheduled destruction. Another was of the patient who told her doctor, 'When I lift my arm thus, doctor, it hurts me'. 'Then don't lift it that way, madam.'¹ A third was of a private patient of his own. 'I took one look at her and I told her, "I can tell you what's wrong with you, madam"'. "Oh, do, please! doctor! I've been to ever so many specialists, and they cannot tell me." "You drink too much, madam." She didn't like that at all. But I was right, and she knew it!

Pain always drew out his quick profound pity. I have reason to remember this trait with gratitude and affection. Once, when I was down with quinsy, Bridges was deeply distressed. His inquiries were constant, and he sent me his last bottle of his best port, all that was left of some very special vintage sent him by his son. I am so little of a connoisseur in wine that almost any recipient would have been worthier. And of course I could swallow nothing without extreme misery, and least of all could drink anything of this kind. But his message was, 'Tell him from me, as a doctor, that it's the best thing for quinsy'. The kindness behind the action was not a thing to be forgotten.

He was so sensitive to physical suffering (more sensitive, I think, than any other man I have met) that he never passed the place in the Broad where Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer died without shuddering. 'That's where they burnt Cranmer', he once observed to me. 'Terribly cruel they used to be. Awfully cruel, I call it—to burn a man *alive*!' As I set his words down, I am aware that they must seem banal and inadequate; but the real horror which accompanied them was not. His horror at Hindu widow-burning caused him to drop in on me for information on the subject, when he was writing *The Testament of Beauty*, and I went round to Chilswell afterwards, to work out with him and Mrs. Bridges on a map of India the sites more particularly associated with the practice. The result appeared in the passage where he speaks of how 'the mild Hindu . . . burnt his multitudinous girl-concubines alive'.

To a man of such quick feelings we can imagine what a burden must

¹ This, I am afraid, is a chestnut.

have been the tedious and often distressing duties which he endured daily for so many years. He has left a kind of précis of his experience, in his packed and yet moving *Account of the Casualty Department at St. Bartholomew's Hospital*, first printed in the Hospital Reports for 1878. He himself saw 30,940 patients during the year: and the Hospital received over 151,000.

No description could do justice to the strange hubbub in which auscultation had to be carried on. The rattle of carts in the street, the hum of voices inside, the slamming of doors, the noise of people walking about, the coughings of all kinds, the crying of babies, the scraping of impatient feet, the stamping of cold ones, the chinking of the bottles and zinc tickets, and, after eleven o'clock, the hammering, sawing, and tinkering of the carpenters and blacksmiths who came not unfrequently at that hour to set things generally to rights.

Others might have complained of different discomforts. Characteristically, with his peculiar sensitiveness to sound values, Bridges seems to have noticed only that of the clamour in which he had to work.

Not all these patients were grievously ill. For example, there was the man who, when asked what was wrong, replied that he did not know that anything was, 'but as I was passing the Hospital I thought I'd just step in and have a dose of medicine'. Bridges observes, 'I should have been sorry to have drunk the dose that was prescribed for him.' He noted, rightly, 'Ignorance lay at the root of most of the evils'—ignorance which he styles, with perhaps less justice, 'traditional, inveterate and wilful ignorance'.

Never was any casualty report so nervously and tersely written, with grim humour as well as pity. That pity was called out most by the sight of the young lost untimely—as in his well-known poem, 'To a Dead Child', first published in 1880: 'Perfect little body, without fault or stain on thee'.

His medical career was to end sooner than he had planned. In June 1881 he had what I believe was the only illness of his whole life until the last year of it; it was pneumonia, and in November he left the Great Northern Hospital and to recover strength toured Italy and Sicily. On his return, in 1882, he married Monica Waterhouse and entered on the happiest and most prolonged middle age that any poet ever knew. For the next twenty-three years his books were his adventures; books and his home, exceptionally restful and contented, made up his existence.

He never knew the stress of poverty, the want of leisure, or the disquiet of religious or political questioning. In fairness we must add that his own temperament, almost uniquely indifferent to fame, provided the deepest basis of this peace. And his environment was perfect for his

genius. Yattendon, in a region where the Berkshire Downs—which lack nothing to make them equal the Sussex or Kent Downs, except the salt neighbourhood of the sea—unite stretching vastness with the intimacy and unguarded beauty of woodland and coppice, gave him exactly that ordered world which pleased him in nature as in man's affairs. The machine age had not yet created the internal combustion engine, to shatter quietness and spaciousness and to set time racing. It was an easy leisured journey to Oxford, whose Common Rooms ensured a continuity of Eton and other friends, now settled in the same security of cultured profession and gracious circumstances as Bridges himself. He could drop in at Lincoln or Corpus or Magdalen or Worcester, sure of comrades with whom he could enjoy long cracks about the authors and topics for which he cared. At Yattendon itself, Henry Beeching, a poet and critic of reputation, husband of Bridges's niece, was rector.

During the next twenty years a steady flow of lyrics, plays in all modes, and one notable example of narrative verse came from him. 'The charm of that place, and that house, for me', wrote Henry Newbolt, 'could never be expressed, much less exaggerated'.¹ 'The pleasant old red-brick house with its rook-haunted garden had just the combination of beauty, simplicity and remoteness suitable to a poet of his Miltonic order.'²

¹ *The Later Life and Letters of Sir Henry Newbolt*, p. 271.

² *D.N.B.*

II

SHORTER POEMS

O my uncared-for songs, what are ye worth,
That in my secret book with so much care
I write you, this one here and that one there,
Marking the time and order of your birth?
How, with a fancy so unkind to mirth,
A sense so hard, a style so worn and bare,
Look ye for any welcome anywhere
From any shelf or heart-home on the earth?

Should others ask you this, say then I yearn'd
To write you such as once, when I was young,
Finding I should have loved and thereto turn'd.
'Twere something yet to live again among
The gentle youth beloved, and where I learn'd
My art, be there remember'd for my song.

The Growth of Love, 51.

BRIDGES tells us¹ that at Eton he studied and wrote verses constantly; he mentions specially his 'last serious poem at school . . . a sentimental imitation of Spenser'. Under all his quick and varied mental and physical life, poetry was his deepest preoccupation. Lionel Muirhead, who accompanied him up the Nile in 1868, wrote: 'I find in my sketch-book a small pencil drawing of him smoking his pipe with the legend beneath: "R. B. as he appeared when he composed his ode" . . . I have also got a sketch of him writing in one of the temples at Phylae.'

This early work has vanished. Bridges was always at pains to destroy what he regarded as second-rate in his verse, his only blind spot being where his few political pieces were in question. At Eton he wrote less as he read more; 'my own boyish muse was being silenced by my reading of the great poets'. The verse which has survived is most of it exceptionally late in time of composition, and includes hardly anything written before his thirtieth year. There are no *juvenilia*: his first volume appeared in 1873, beautiful, spontaneous yet carefully wrought. The apprentice work which went to its excellence was flung away and never recalled. The book was not a sifting and selection, so far as we know, but new. 'I went to the seaside for two weeks and wrote it there.'

¹ *The Poems of Digby Mackworth Dolben*, p. xx.

Little in this first volume is perishable, and it includes 'Clear and gentle stream', 'I will not let thee go', the lovely 'Elegy for a Lady whom Grief for the Death of her Betrothed Killed', 'The wood is bare, a river mist is steeping', 'A poppy grows upon the shore', 'Long are the hours the sun is above', and 'Poor withered rose'.

In 1876 he printed jesting Latin elegiacs for friends at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and published anonymously the first draft of his sonnet-sequence, *The Growth of Love*. A second volume of lyrics, 'By the author of *The Growth of Love*', appeared in 1879. In this some of his greatest poems swim superbly into English literature, a marvellous fleet: 'Will Love again awake?', 'Wooing', 'I have loved flowers that fade', 'Spring Ode' and 'Reply', 'A Water Party', 'The Downs', 'There is a hill beside the silver Thames', 'A Passer-by', 'Elegy among the Tombs', 'O Golden Sun', and the exquisite 'Late Spring Evening'. There are also three sonnets, of which two went ultimately into *The Growth of Love*.

In 1881 a contribution from him appeared in a brochure, *The Garland of Rachel*, which was privately printed by the Rev. C. H. O. Daniel, later Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, and one of Bridges's longest and deepest friendships had begun. For many years his books generally came out in these limited private editions from Mr. Daniel's press. Of ten books published between 1881 and 1903, one was an edition of 300 copies, three of 150, one of 105, one of 36, one of 30, one of 22.¹ After 1903 his first publications were of the normal kind, except for his Shakespeare essay (*On the Influence of the Audience*), which was issued first in the United States, his only book published first in that country.

In 1880 a third small volume of lyrics appeared. It included for the first time 'London Snow', 'Thou didst delight my eyes', 'On a Dead Child', and two of the best sonnets in *The Growth of Love*: 'At times with hurried hoofs' and 'I heard great Hector sounding war's alarms'.

As a result of this slow watchful gathering, when his *Shorter Poems* in four books was published in October 1890, it was what A. E. Housman has styled it, the most perfect book of verse ever written. It was reprinted November 1890, and again in 1891 and 1894. It was frequently reprinted afterwards, and his reputation began, and more than began; 'it may be safely said that his poetry never lost ground once gained'.²

The *Shorter Poems* are extraordinarily unlike any other English poet's work. But, because of the fugitive beauty of a few, of such lyrics as

¹ G. L. McKay, *Bibliography of Robert Bridges*. McKay lists seventy-nine publications.

² *D.N.B.*, 'Robert Bridges' (by Nowell C. Smith).

'I have loved flowers that fade', 'Thou didst delight my eyes', 'Awake, the land is scattered with light', 'I love my lady's eyes' (with its exquisitely fragile inset undertone 'Say, O say! saith the music'), shallow readers said that his style 'lacked originality'. This charge Arthur Symons answered effectively.

It is true that his finest lyrics might have found their place . . . in an Elizabethan song-book. And yet they are not archaic, a going back to the external qualities of style, but a thinking back, as of one who really, in thought, lives in another age, to which his temper of mind is more akin. They are very personal, but personal in a way so abstract, so little dependent on the accident of what we call personality, that it seems the most natural thing in the world for him to turn to a style which comes to him with a great anonymous tradition.¹

Only once do I find a resemblance to Elizabethan lyric which strikes me as close, and this is when I turn from Bridges's fine 'Invitation to the Country' to Thomas Campion's

Now winter nights enlarge
The number of their hours;
And clouds their storms discharge
Upon the airy towers.

But the resemblance is almost certainly accidental, for Campion had only just been rediscovered by A. H. Bullen when Bridges wrote his 'Invitation'; it must be put down to the two poets' community of studies. Both were musicians, doctors, skilled technicians and innovators in verse.

Perhaps the only definite instance of recollection of another poet's style and method which any one has cited in Bridges's lyrics is the obvious adoption, in 'London Snow', of a trick which Gerard Hopkins himself had borrowed from Donne—the use of ejaculation to obtain exclamatory vividness: 'O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!';² "O look at the trees!" they cried, "O look at the trees!" This is a trivial detail, thrust openly on our attention. But something of Hopkins's unique freshness of vision of natural things may have subtly gone into the glowing colour of Bridges's own lyrics.

There is, however, one poet—and one only—whose actual tone is caught sometimes by Bridges, especially in his more elaborate autumnal and wintry scenes. This is R. W. Dixon, whose work he so admired; they have a similarity of feeling and method. Here is a passage from the end of Bridges's poem, 'The storm is over, the land hushes to rest':

¹ *Studies in Prose and Verse* (1904), pp. 210–11. The Bridges essay is dated 1901.

² G. M. Hopkins, *The Starlight Night*.

The day is done: the tired land looks for night:
 She prays to the night to keep
 In peace her nerves of delight:
 While silver mist upstealeth silently,
 And the broad cloud-driving moon in the clear sky
 Lifts o'er the firs her shining shield,
 And in her tranquil light
 Sleep falls on forest and field.
 See! sléep hath fallen: the trees are asleep:
 The night is come. The land is wrapt in sleep.

Set beside this a passage from Dixon's *Odes*:

As out of yon grey glooms,
 When the cloud grows luminous and shiftily riven,
 Forth comes the moon, the sweet surprise of heaven:
 And her footfall light
 Drops on the multiplied wave: her face is seen
 In evening's pallor green:
 And she waxes bright
 With the death of the tinted air: yea, brighter grows
 In sunset's gradual close.

Or, take his lovely poem, 'The Fall of the Leaf':

Rise in their place the woods: the trees have cast,
 Like earth to earth, their children: now they stand
 Above the graves where lie their very last:
 Each pointing with her empty hand
 And mourning o'er the russet floor,
 Naked and dispossessed:
 The queenly sycamore,
 The linden, and the aspen, and the rest. . . .
 Lo, there on high the unlighted moon is hung,
 A cloud among the clouds: she giveth pledge,
 Which none from hope debars,
 Of hours that shall the naked boughs re-fledge
 In seasons high: her drifted train among
 Musing she leads the silent song,
 Grave mistress of white clouds, as lucid queen of stars.

All this amounts to the smallest debt ever owed by a poet; and in the half-century since the *Shorter Poems* appeared in collection, I can think of no poet who has imitated their author, nor do I think that he is imitable. Himself stereotyping no forms, he changed and developed

them as the inner impulse of his mood directed, until satisfied that he had done all that could be done. He then turned to other forms and style.

His form in these lyrics is, I think, almost always exactly right. They are his unique contribution to English poetry; the essential thing was said by Symons, over forty years ago. 'This man has put into his verse only what remains when all the others have finished. It is a kind of essence; it is what is imperishable in perfume; it is what is nearest in words to silence.'¹ Beside *Shorter Poems*, all other contemporary poetry seems garrulous, whatever its other qualities. This lightness of texture, this almost bodiless grace and springing freedom—for all the care with which the diction is chosen—were new, or attained by other poets only rarely and at long intervals.

Every writer on Bridges has noted that, like Campion and Milton, he possessed what very few of our poets have had, the trained musician's ear, cultivated to catch the tiniest of sound-values. This gave him 'a delicate, and in time instinctive, sense of the musical value of words and syllables, the precise singing quality of rhythms'.² But his skill goes far beyond this. 'I doubt', says Symons, 'if many of his effects, irresponsible as they often come to seem, have come to him in his sleep; it is almost a point of honour with him, the artist's scrupulous honour, to know beforehand what he is going to do, and to do it as precisely as he decides upon doing it.' Before him, except in *Samson Agonistes* and in Keats's *Odes*, which he had closely studied—Tennyson to Bridges appeared mannered and in his later years at the mercy of his own craftsmanship—there had been nothing in English lyrical literature comparable to *Shorter Poems* for rhythmical accomplishment.

Yet the result of this careful workmanship achieves complete organic unity with the theme and the poet's mood. An obvious example has been cited already. 'The day is done: the tired land looks for night.' Picture and movement (or absence of movement, quietness posed in contentment) are born together, in the stealth and penetration and inward diffusion of the 'silver mist', in the splendour and decision and vast spreading empire of 'the broad cloud-driving moon'. Then the lines fall to the sleeping world like a curtain.

Bridges's skill can be studied at its most ordinary and simplest, on a level below which he practically never falls, in 'There is a hill beside the silver Thames'. The poem is not in the first flight of these astonishing lyrics, yet is such a river-picture as English poetry can show nowhere else:

¹ *Studies in Prose and Verse*, 1904.

² Symons, loc. cit.

There is a hill beside the silver Thames,
Shady with birch and beech and odorous pine:
And brilliant underfoot with thousand gems
Steeply the thickets to his floods decline.

Straight trees in every place
Their thick tops interlace,
And pendant branches trail their foliage fine
Upon his watery face.

Swift from the sweltering pasturage he flows:
His stream, alert to seek the pleasant shade,
Pictures his gentle purpose, as he goes
Straight to the caverned pool his toil has made.

His winter floods lay bare
The stout roots in the air:
His summer streams are cool, when they have played
Among their fibrous hair.

Inner impulse gives the metre its law, the spreading lines moving as easily and surely as the Thames of which they speak. The longer lines give the effect of expansion, as when the stream flings out its arms into backwaters or to embrace its islands; the shorter, contracting as the stream contracts between its higher banks, show the current concentrated again and moving with firmer march or give the verse a definite 'wave', as in the rocking movement of

laden barges float
By banks of myosote;
And scented flag and golden flower-de-lys
Delay the loitering boat.

Each line has its work, to reinforce the poet's purpose and give his thought rhythmic limbs: there is gentleness, as of branches in a breeze, in 'Shady with birch and beech and odorous pine': hard sure treading, in 'And brilliant underfoot with thousand gems'. Then the ground breaks away: 'Steeply the thickets to his floods decline': two short lines:

Straight trees in every place
Their thick tops interlace

thrust up like the trees themselves, then change to the riverside bushes:

And pendant branches trail their foliage fine
Upon his watery face.

Note how long the voice must linger on that 'trail', as the dragging sweep of the verse moves the branches over the watery face.

In the following stanza, loving personification of the river makes him live before us almost as a river-god: leaping up, in 'Swift from the sweltering pasturage he flows': lifting a watchful leisured head, as he looks for a favourite resting-place, 'His stream, alert to seek the pleasant shade.' In 'alert' the verse sees its mark and shoots to it arrow-fashion: 'Straight to the caverned pool his toil has made'—a line which reminds me of nothing so much as a snake whipping to its hole with sinuous gait, with sudden pauses and equally sudden accelerations.

Take a later stanza in the same poem:

And on this side the island, where the pool
Eddies away, are tangled mass on mass
The water-weeds, that net the fishes cool,
And scarce allow a narrow stream to pass;
Where spreading crowfoot mars
The drowning nenuphars,
Waving the tassels of her silken grass
Below her silver stars.

Rousing himself (yet hardly rousing himself) the rivergod moves from his reverie, in the sideways swerve of the rhythm—"the pool eddies away": grows almost static again, his tide a miniature Sargasso: and in the last four lines, whose iambic regularity, broken by only one trochee, reinforces the thought with their cadence, the stream lies widely open to sky and beholder.

Metrical and rhythmical achievement, on anything like this scale and with this variety, was, I repeat, something new. Others before Bridges had attained such elaborate careful excellence as we find in his 'Elegy for a Lady whom Grief for the Death of Her Betrothed Killed':

Cloke her in ermine, for the night is cold,
And wrap her warmly, for the night is long,
In pious hands the flaming torches hold,
While her attendants, chosen from among
Her faithful virgin throng,
May lay her in her cedar litter,
Decking her coverlet with sprigs of gold,
Roses, and lilies white that best befit her.

Also, doubtless there are parallels to the bold outrush of

Her beauty would surprise
Gazers on Autumn eves,
Who watched the broad moon rise
Upon the scattered sheaves

or to the effect of frank claim and assertion, followed by flanking reason firmly stepping up and out:

I will not let thee go.
Had not the great sun seen, I might;
Or were he reckoned slow
To bring the false to light,
Then might I let thee go.

But what was new, and a stumblingblock, so that reviewers complained that Bridges did not know how to write metre, was the triumphant marriage of speech-rhythms with traditional forms. You had merely to read the verse as if it were ordinary prose, and fresh subtleties came crowding in, so that the rhythm imaged forth perfectly the picture which imagination imposed on the words and lines. The best-known example of this is of course 'London Snow', perhaps the most consummate metrical achievement in the language, the words seeming to follow the movement of the flakes—pausing whenever they pause, drifting aside when they drift aside—finding their way down unhurriedly and casually and yet certainly:

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;
Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;
Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:
Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing.

'London Snow' was too convincing in its perfection not to make its way past ignorance and the prejudice of ears deaf to all but the most conventional of rhythmical harmonies, and in later days Bridges rather fell out of love with it, or at any rate out of patience with anthologists, who seemed to know nothing else that he had written.

Yet for even that special excellence which stood out so clearly that the wayfaring man, though an anthologist, could not help seeing other pieces were hardly inferior to 'London Snow'. They are now familiar to all who care for poetry: 'A Passer-by' with its 'splendid ship' perfect from its 'proud nostril curve', 'aslant with trim tackle and shrouding'; his tribute, 'O bold majestic downs, smooth, fair and lonely', to our pocket southern mountains, which for all their smallness by Continental standards are sufficiently wild, impressive, and spacious; or 'April 1885', whose intricacy of ingenuity in design nevertheless does what ingenuity in this sort hardly ever achieves, and brings to life a whole stretch of sky and landscape:

Wanton with long delay the gay spring leaping cometh;
 The blackthorn starreth now his bough on the eve of May:
 All day in the sweet box-tree the bee for pleasure hummeth:
 The cuckoo sends afloat his note on the air all day.

Now dewy nights again and rain in gentle shower
 At root of tree and flower have quenched the winter's drouth:
 On high the hot sun smiles, and banks of cloud uptower
 In bulging heads that crowd for miles the dazzling south.

The other thing which is unique in Bridges's lyrics is their impersonal quality. He really was singularly uninterested in his own personality. The lyrics sprang spontaneously out of emotion or vision, but the man who felt or saw has fallen out of sight: he gives his reader few glimpses of himself. His lyrics are 'pure poetry', if such a thing exists.

In 1894 the four books of the *Shorter Poems* became five, and their total fell just two short of the century. Of this harvest not more than half a dozen pieces at most could be spared as merely verse and such as other poets might have written. In this half-dozen I include the rondeau, 'His poisoned shafts, that fresh he dips', and the triolets, which I take to be among the very few survivals from the times of experiment, when we know that he tried his hand at the French forms which Henley and Dobson were popularizing. Even these slight pieces justify themselves, as evidence that he could handle the most conventional forms, no less than his own individual and constantly varying ones.

Once, and once only, Bridges seems to me to have written on beyond his inspiration. But my reader shall judge for himself.

Wherefore to-night so full of care,
 My soul, revolving hopeless strife,
 Pointing at hindrance and the bare
 Painful escapes of fitful life?

Shaping the doom that may befall
 By precedent of terror past:
 By love dishonoured, and the call
 Of friendship slighted at the last?
 By treasured names, the little store
 That memory out of wreck could save
 Of loving hearts, that gone before
 Call their old comrade to the grave?

O soul, be patient: thou shalt find
 A little matter mend all this;
 Some strain of music to thy mind,
 Some praise for skill not spent amiss.

Every phrase and line has been inevitable, up to that last stanza's dying fall. Yet probably the poem could not have been allowed to finish so, for a reason other than formal perfection—it seems to subside on a solely selfish satisfaction of sorrow. Bridges therefore continues it—yet hardly escapes this fault by adding stanzas which are a poor conclusion to the closely knit writing which preceded them and are not more than adequate:

Again shall pleasure overflow
Thy cup with sweetness, thou shalt taste
Nothing but sweetness, and shalt grow
Half sad for sweetness run to waste.

O happy life! I hear thee sing,
O rare delight of mortal stuff!
I praise my days for all they bring,
Yet are they only not enough.

The *Shorter Poems* rarely repeat a triumph; their beauty is of many kinds and many tints. Their range and variety are foreshadowed in the very first poem, 'Clear and gentle stream', an invocation such as few streams have received since Horace's *fons Bandusiae*. It introduces us to a summer paradise of shade and flowing soft waters. Then cool pellucid freshness leads us to one of his most superbly imagined pictures:

evening comes,
Creeping up the glade,
With her lengthening shade,
And the tardy boon,
Of her brightening moon.

This poet's quiet world has its own intensities.

Shorter Poems are lyrical, descriptive; in the main, are poems of natural scenes. The infrequent human figures—a shepherd, the miller beside his sacks, a farmer—that appear in Bridges's landscape are all leisurely and traditional, just as all his work is traditional, in that word's best sense, as meaning something which has a living persistent root in ages which have gone before. Swinburne praised *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* as the most English-coloured verse in the language. They are not more so than Bridges's *Shorter Poems*. Of course the England is a strictly limited England—but so is that of Wordsworth and Shakespeare and every other English poet. Bridges's England is a country long settled and entirely free from the savagery of mountain and moor—a landscape rarely swept by storm, a vast clear horizon and a skyscape where clouds stand almost

still or move only as if on peaceful quest to that adjacent Continent of which Kent has been more a part than any other of our counties. When they do stir from their own beloved region they go, not to any jagged tempest-vexed grandeur, but

All one way to the south they haste,
The south, their pleasant fatherland . . .

And sail and sail far out of sight.
But still I watch their fleecy trains,
That piling all the south with light,
Dapple in France the fertile plains.

For such sombre majesty as that of 'the fraternal four of Borrowdale', under whose roof even at noonday gaunt supernatural figures gathered, or for the mist-shrouded desolation of the fells and the wind's 'bleak music' in stone walls, doubtless we must turn elsewhere. But, as I have said already, I know no poet whose landscape effects are not mainly of one kind. What this poet has done is to bring into literature the two regions he knew intimately, and with such sure touch and abundance of detail and atmospheric appearance that they are in our literature for ever. Alexander Pope, a writer for whom he had small esteem, has made the Thames of the early eighteenth century, from Richmond down to London, a landscape of poetry. Thanks to Bridges, whatever changes may come posterity will always know the Thames Valley of our own day that has now just passed into yesterday—the Thames and the Downs.

A more serious objection than this one of the sameness of his landscape effects is the complaint that the *Shorter Poems* know little of a world where penury and helplessness drag out their days, and that Bridges's verse knew hardly anything of sorrow.

Others have concerned themselves with passions more vehement, with thoughts more profound, with a wilder music, a more variable colour; others have been romantic, realistic, classical, tumultuous; have brought a remote magic into verse, and have made verse out of sorrowful things close at hand.¹

That is true. Passion hardly entered his world, and the grievous things were rarely close at hand; they were known by report if known at all. Bridges liked the ordered peace in which his lot was cast, temperance of thought and personal habit was his by choice as well as inheritance and training. Yet the *Shorter Poems* contain two pieces whose poignancy none could miss. One has been mentioned already, 'On a Dead Child'. The other is that on the death of his wife's brother:

¹ Symons, loc. cit.

I never shall love the snow again
Since Maurice died.

Keats has an unforgettable reference to Milton's quality of glancing pathos, thrown up in a phrase almost spoken under the breath: he cited, as examples, the loss

which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world,

and the hardly uttered half-reference to his own hard fortune, prefigured in that of murdered Orpheus,

nor could the Muse
Defend her son.

I find the same half-tone of muffled sorrow in Bridges, and often where its sudden presence is the more startlingly effective for being so unexpected; in the dead leaves that are

Forgotten with the spring, that is forgotten
By them that can forget:

in the low final reminder of 'Weep not to-day':

Fight, to be found fighting: nor far away
Deem, nor strange thy doom.
Like this sorrow 'twill come,
And the day will be to-day.

Nevertheless, it is part of the unique excellence of *Shorter Poems* that 'no book of poems so entirely happy in tone had appeared since Blake's *Songs of Innocence*'.¹

When he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1913, an influential journalist disgustingly accumulated a selection of Bridges's adjectives, to show how dull and undistinguished they were, and complained that his grass was always green, instead of emerald or flashing, his skies blue and not turquoise or azure or sapphire. The charge in itself is true, though its implications are false. His verse does contain descriptions which startle by boldness of beauty that takes the breath: the flush of polished soft gold of palm-willow lifted on the Easter air:

There the spring-goddess cowers in frail attire
Of frightened fire

the felicity of 'the windy moon-enchanted night' contrasted with 'indo-

¹ E. de Selincourt, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 215.

lent noonday'; the purposeful steady coming of the dark season which follows the time of flowers:

June's birth they greet, and when their bloom
Dislustres, withering on his tomb,
Then summer hath a shortening day,
And steps slow to decay

the sequence of exquisite low sounds recollected in flawless phrasing and in a rhythm which effortlessly restores them to imagination:

whether
From waves of rustling wheat it was,
Recoveringly that pass:
Or a hum of bees in the queenly robes of the lime:
Or a descant in pairing time
Of warbling birds: or watery bells
Of rivulets in the hills.

But for the most part what Bridges seeks and attains is strict accuracy—just that, but by its fitness and freedom from meaningless cliché more interpretative than the dazzlingly unapt. Knit watchfulness is not much commoner in poets than in other men, and it was rarely wanting in this poet. He notes everything—for example, as he indicates by the almost colloquial vigour of the verb, the seeming suddenness with which the spring flowers arrive in their places:

The pinks along my garden walks
Have all shot forth their summer stalks.

If it is not by outstanding felicity, such as moves delight in other poets (and on occasion in this poet also), that Bridges stirs us, nevertheless felicity is present as a constant effect, in a rightness of verb and adjective which shows how completely the brain is in what the eye sees, so that it finds without effort the rhythmic speech to express the thing seen. Thus, to return to a poem which, as I have said, ranks in the second class of his work, in his 'hill beside the silver Thames' even the adjective 'silver' is not a cliché but does double service. It sets the picture in the line of English tradition, and links it up with pictures of days when a poet might without too much absurdity speak of 'silver-footed Thamesis', though it was Thames flowing between London streets. It reminds the reader also of how silvery a streak the river appears in the landscape, when seen from the heights above Oxford. Later in the poem, when the crowfoot flowers are styled silver, again the adjective is right—any spring the reader can assure himself that they can be styled nothing

else, however much a poet may want to avoid a word that has been over-worked by lazy versifiers. The silken shining filaments sprawling over the water cast a net and spangle of silver. Similarly exact is the adjective in the 'drowning nenuphars'—ducking and bobbing in the current and never doing more, even if no crowfoot meshes are stranglingly present, than merely push their heads just free.

I doubt if the mythopoeic startling visualization which some affect to miss in him is very abundant in any English poet except our three or four greatest. Unfortunately, many readers, if they happen to like one particular quality in a favourite author, demand that every other poet should provide it in repetition, instead of his own different gifts. Having read with delight

Thou who didst waken from his sunny dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers,
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

not unnaturally they find it hard to discover other poetry which gives the same shock of pleasurable perception. Nor will they discover such poetry easily or often. Yet I think that in Bridges's *Shorter Poems* there are pictures comparable for magic and arresting loveliness, even to Shelley's of the Middle Sea:

I saw the Virgin-mother clad in green,
Walking the sprinkled meadows at sundown;
While yet the moon's cold flame was hung between
The day and night, above the dusky town:
I saw her brighter than the Western gold,
Whereto she faced in splendour to behold. . . .

And o'er the treetops, scattered in mid air,
The exhausted clouds, laden with crimson light
Floated, or seemed to sleep; and, highest there,
One planet broke the lingering ranks of night;
Daring day's company, so he might spy
The Virgin-queen once with his watchful eye.

The vivid fresh beauty of this must surely stay for ever in the mind that has once seen it.

'What had led me to poetry,' he says, 'was the inexhaustible satisfaction of form, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the masterly

control of the material: it was an art which I hoped to learn.'¹ He did learn it while writing *Shorter Poems*. No other collection of English lyrics contains an equal number, or anything like half the number, of poems entirely flawless.

¹ *Poems of Dolben*, p. xxii.

III

THE GROWTH OF LOVE

THIS celebrated sonnet-sequence, essentially lyrical in tone, was a parallel flowering with the *Shorter Poems*. As Bridges finally left it, it contains 69 sonnets. The earliest collection, issued privately in 1876, 'when I was reading in St. Bartholomew's Hospital', had 24. The 1889 edition, another private issue of 22 copies only,¹ contained 79 sonnets. The pirating of this edition in the United States precipitated ordinary publication in England, in 1890.

As to the form which he used, Bridges has left it on private record,

I began to write the sonnets in the Italian form but had to renounce it before I could finish, on account of the want of variety of rhyme which hampered the sense. The first sketch was made when I was new to Italian poetry, and some of the work had a false tone due to the imitation of Petrarch's manner. I wrote at different times many sonnets on aspects of art, but destroyed them as being cold and didactic.²

I do not follow this. There *is* an imitative strain in some of the sonnets, but it is in those which are Elizabethan in form and style, not in those which are Italian. As to the form generally, Bridges is not pedantically orthodox; he uses the Petrarchan form, sometimes in Milton's variant arrangement, but is often straightforwardly Shakespearian or mixes both rhyme-schemes. The overwhelming majority are in the Italian mode, despite what he says in criticism of its shortcomings.

Bridges left it on record that *The Growth of Love* is autobiographical. This is clear enough; a moving and beautiful love-story casts its shadow. Yet, if with this key Bridges unlocked his heart, the lock has clashed to, and the key is lost. He kept his personal secrets, and throughout life and in especial just before he died was at pains to destroy all that told more than he chose should be told of him. The lady abides in eternal anonymity, which is what her lover desired.

The sequence continually widened its scope, to include later sonnets which commemorate his supremely happy married life, and other sonnets also, many of which had no reference to the sequence or its theme. *The Growth of Love* became little more than a title, to hold together what was autobiographical, certainly, but was used further as a general receptacle

¹ The Daniel Press, Oxford.

² Notes lent by R. B. to Kenneth Sisam.

for any sonnets which he wrote. Such is the poet's skill in arrangement that these fit in well enough, yet not so well as to avoid giving the whole an appearance of want of depth of feeling; they are one of several features which give it more of the character of a protracted literary exercise than it originally was, and they lengthen it out.

There is no philosophical study of love, and nothing of the psychological insight and interest of Meredith's *Modern Love*, of which it is natural to think in this connexion. With Bridges love is romantic, as in modern Europe's earlier poetry, with nothing of grief or misery ever to cloud it. There is nothing of progress, and very little—and that little only occasionally and unconvincingly—of setback or pause, despite the movement implied in the title. Hence Symons remarks that 'Every sonnet has a calm temperate skill of its own; some . . . come to us with precisely the accent of the lyrics', yet he is left rather chilled, like most critics, by the complete series, despite 'this fine skill, this serious and interesting substance. . . . As we read each sonnet we say: How fine this is! and when we have read them all we say: How fine they all are!' Yet 'the poet who, in his lyrics, seems to speak for all the world, telling every one some intimate secret which has never whispered itself before, speaks now for himself, and finds himself unconsciously generalizing. He seems to repeat only what others have said before him; admirable things, to which he adds the belief of experience, but with no quickening of the pulses.'

Bridges may have meant to keep the poems private while he lived. 'It was not my wish or intention to offer these sonnets to the public, but since they have been published in America without my permission, and some of them have appeared in collections of poetry in this country,' he wrote in 1898, 'and have been mentioned in professional criticism, I have thought it wise to come to their rescue.'

Sonnet sequences are out of fashion and will probably not come back. But our earlier literature contains many: the renowned Elizabethan sequences of Sidney and Spenser and Shakespeare and Daniel and Drayton: Wordsworth's *River Duddon* sonnets, as well as some deplorable sequences which need not be brought into this comparison: Hartley Coleridge's *Sonnets on the Seasons*, Elizabeth Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Rossetti's *House of Life*, and the sequences, written in irregular rhyme and line pattern yet essentially sonnet sequences, of Meredith and Wilfrid Blunt. Where does *The Growth of Love* stand? I believe it would rank higher if the sonnets which Bridges added, and which have a general application, and none to its central and original theme, had been published separately. It ranks, of course, lower than Shakespeare's

Sonnets, and in sincerity and passion is far inferior to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. But among other sequences its only superior is *The House of Life*, and it is only by contrast with what it might have been that it fails.

It is best to read the sonnets individually, not as part of a sequence but as memorable for their own special beauty and accomplishment, which are often great. Hardly any sonnet is thin or weak, and only one is downright bad. Sonnet after sonnet is of extreme loveliness, and almost all are technically superb. Strain and effort have been finally banished, for an unfaltering control of form. The confident assurance of the opening sonnet is renewed (yet not repeated—no poet repeats himself less) in No. 26:

The work is done, and from the fingers fall
The bloodwarm tools that brought the labour thro':
The tasking eye that overrunneth all
Rests, and affirms there is no more to do.

Perhaps this quality of certainty is the one in which they most excel; ease and sureness of strength and skill, which move words as the brain decides—recalling Dante's famous boast, made of a tongue in which rhymes are commoner and come far more promptly than in our own, that no word had ever made him say what he did not choose to say, whereas he himself had forced many a word to say what it never intended.

I could spare only one sonnet, No. 17. It marries an unhappy casualness, almost a flippancy, of rhythm with that inadequate acceptance of things as Eton and Oxford like to have them, which is Bridges's intellectual weakness. His world is not ours, and men and women hereafter will less and less think that it should have been any one's, unless set on fairer juster lines. Yet how attractive that world was, in the deeper lines of its thought, which were religious and artistic rather than ethical and social, and how beauty arose out of its acceptance, Bridges shows in such sonnets as 'Rejoice, ye dead, where'er your spirits dwell':

Now ye are starry names, above the storm
And war of Time and nature's endless wrong
Ye flit, in pictured truth and peaceful form,
Wing'd with bright music and melodious song,—
The flaming flowers of heaven, making May-dance
In dear Imagination's rich pleasance

and in the final sonnet of the sequence, the noble paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer.

For the mastery with which Bridges handles his central theme, the worship of love and of one loved person above all, consider No. 58:

When first I saw thee, dearest, if I say
The spells that conjure back the hour and place,
And evermore I look upon thy face,
As in the spring of years long pass'd away;
No fading of thy beauty's rich array,
No detriment of age on thee I trace,
But time's defeat written in spoils of grace,
From rivals robb'd, whom thou didst pity and slay.

So hath thy growth been, thus thy faith is true,
Unchanged in change, still to my growing sense,
To life's desire the same, and nothing new:
But as thou wert in dream and prescience
At love's arising, now thou stand'st to view
In the broad noon of his magnificence.

Concerning this sonnet, Bridges has left the note, 'Lionel Muirhead thinks this my best poem'. Certainly it is beautiful, but it contains flaws which, though slight—the ease of the rhymes, which impose too much softness on a fluency present already, from its echoing of Elizabethan thought and phrasing: the fanciful hyperbole of the last line of the octet—make it inferior to the sonnets 'I heard great Hector' and 'O weary pilgrims', and inferior also to such perfection as we have in Nos. 29 and 45:

29

I travel to thee with the sun's first rays,
That lift the dark west and unwrap the night;
I dwell beside thee when he walks the height,
And fondly toward thee at his setting gaze.
I wait upon thy coming, but always—
Dancing to meet my thoughts if they invite—
Thou hast outrun their longing with delight,
And in my solitude dost mock my praise.

Now doth my drop of time transcend the whole:
I see no fame in Khufu's pyramid,
No history where loveless Nile doth roll.
—This is eternal life, which doth forbid
Mortal detraction to the exalted soul,
And from her inward eye all fate hath hid.

45

In this neglected, ruin'd edifice
 Of works unperfected and broken schemes,
 Where is the promise of my early dreams,
 The smile of beauty and the pearl of price?
 No charm is left now that could once entice
 Wind-wavering fortune from her golden streams,
 And full in flight decrepit purpose seems,
 Trailing the banner of his old device.

Within the house a froze and numbing air
 Has chill'd endeavour: sickly memories reign
 In every room, and ghosts are on the stair:
 And hope behind the dusty window-pane
 Watches the days go by, and bow'd with care
 Forecasts her last reproach and mortal stain.

I have seemed to count it a fault that a sonnet sometimes uses what I have styled easy rhyme—that is, rhymes which almost automatically summon up attendant rhymes. But to overstress this is to consider too much the quality of rhythmical craggy vigour, which is only one among many desirable excellences. Its absence may be utterly right—as it surely is in the sonnet I have just quoted, with its wonderful sestet and the last two lines of the octet.

As to individual lines which rise far above competence of beauty, however complete, they abound:

He who would bid her speak might sit and sue
 The deep-brow'd Phidian Jove to be untrue
 To his two thousand years' solemnity (No. 31):

In autumn moonlight, when the white air wan
 Is fragrant in the wake of summer hence (No. 57);

The dark and serious angel, who so long
 Vex'd his immortal strength in charge of me (No. 61);

and the perfect landscapes and zestful pictures of vigorous country activities recur continually:

Or say hath flaunting summer a device
 To match our midnight revelry, that rang
 With steel and flame along the snow-girt ice?
 Or when we hark't to nightingales that sang
 On dewy eves in spring, did they entice
 To gentler love than winter's icy fang? (No. 10)

Dreary was winter, wet with changeful sting
 Of clinging snowfall and fast-flying frost;
 And bitterer northwinds then withheld the spring,
 That dallied with her promise till 'twas lost.

A sunless and half-hearted summer drown'd
 The flowers in needful and unwelcom'd rain;
 And Autumn with a sad smile fled uncrown'd
 From fruitless orchards and unripen'd grain (No. 67)

two pictures which recall—and in every respect can stand beside—what are almost the two finest natural scenes in all our poetry, Wordsworth's remembrance of midnight skating along the frozen surface of Esthwaite and Shakespeare's commemoration, in Titania's speech ('These are the forgeries of jealousy'), of a disastrous drenched summer, when even the nine men's morrice was expunged in mud. Finally, to allow this study one more quotation:

While yet we wait for spring, and from the dry
 And blackening east that so embitters March,
 Well-housed must watch grey fields and meadows parch,
 And driven dust and withering snowflake fly;
 Already in glimpses of the tarnish'd sky
 The sun is warm and beckons to the larch,
 And where the covert hazels interarch
 Their tassel'd twigs, fair beds of primrose lie.

Beneath the crisp and wintry carpet hid
 A million buds but stay their blossoming;
 And trustful birds have built their nests amid
 The shuddering boughs, and only wait to sing
 Till one soft shower from the south shall bid,
 And hither tempt the pilgrim steps of spring.

IV

POEMS ON CLASSICAL THEMES

AT Yattendon, while the *Shorter Poems*, Bridges's outstanding and all but flawless contribution to English poetry, were being written, he was writing also longer and elaborate poems. This resulted in a parallelism of the new and entirely original with what is uncertain and often derivative; and he continued to write in both manners for many years. Thus his work, though always technically skilful and often full of beauty, was partly disappointing.

Prometheus the Firegiver, the earlier of Bridges's two dramas on the classical Athenian model, was issued privately, in 1883, as a mark of

friendship that began maybe
In eighteen eighty two or three,
When Daniel printed my PROMETHEUS
—a thing that others judged beneath use—,
He living then in Worcester House
Along with many a rat and mouse,
Which multiplying as their manner is
Had overswarm'd the neighb'ring granaries.¹

By the title he challenged the great names of Aeschylus and Shelley, but by the sub-title, 'A Mask in the Greek Manner', appeared to withdraw the challenge. It is, as a matter of fact, not any sort of mask, as our literature uses the term, but a straightforward play in the Attic manner, such as many poets tried their hands at during the nineteenth century, which is strewn with similar efforts, many of them what Bridges's is not, utter shipwrecks.

Only Milton, among English poets, has revived classical drama successfully, and part of his success was because he found (or created) a story adequate to fill his space. *Prometheus the Firegiver* runs to greater length than its meagre matter and action fill. Its hero has come to Argos expressly to bring the gift of fire. After he has explained his purpose and has answered difficulties that are not very seriously put forward, there is no reason why the play should not finish—yet it continues. Another and more organic fault is that, after his very frank admission of his own 'quisling' behaviour when Zeus cast out his brethren, and his treachery

¹ *Verses Written for Mrs. Daniel.*

to those brethren, Prometheus can hardly pose (though he does) as a selfless benefactor; his action smacks solely of a desire to be avenged.

The play, however, despite its slowness, the drag of Prometheus' long opening speech and of most of the other speeches—what Mr. Breti Young styles 'stiff deposits of unrhymed heroic'¹—despite the abundant platitudes, is easy to read, and it contains Bridges's best blank verse and some fine lyrics. His recent travels in Sicily and Italy provide him with vivid recollection of natural scenes, and the descriptive touches, especially of mountains in storm, are always splendid. Zeus, after he 'wrecked the timeless monuments of heaven', turning to earth

Blew, and the scattered clouds and furlèd snows,
From every part of heaven together flying,
He with brute hands in huge disorder heaped:
They with the winds' weight and his angry breath
Were thawed: in cataracts they fell, and earth
In darkness deep and whelmèd tempest lay.

There are plenty of passages of the same vigour and vivid quality:

I see the cones
And needles of the fir, which by the wind
In melancholy places ceaselessly
Sighing are strewn upon the tufted floor
since from the sun
Fire reaches us, since in the glimmering stars
And pallid moon, in lightning, and the glance
Of tracking meteors that at nightfall show
How in the air a thousand sightless things
Travel, and ever on their windswift course
Flame when they list and into darkness go
And even while he looked his boasted bow
Fell from his hands, and through his veins there ran
A strange oblivious trouble, darkening sense
Till he knew nothing but a hideous fear
Which bade him fly, and faster

a far-off cry,
Whose throat seems the white mountain and its passion
The woe of earth.

There is nothing strange in the abundance of such passages—containing all that study and watchfulness can do, and lacking only inspiration—in a long poem into which a fine poet has put the care which Bridges

¹ *Robert Bridges*, p. 190.

put into *Prometheus the Firegiver*. Yet the verse, even at its best, is plainly not in any way different from what good poets had written before him. What is really interesting in such passages as I have quoted is their style. His master, we know, was Milton. Yet it was not Milton's accent that he caught in his blank verse, but that of Tennyson, and especially Tennyson of the *Idylls of the King*. I cannot explain why this is so; Bridges's one reference to the *Idylls* shows how little he cared for them. 'Well as I loved some of Tennyson's early lyrics, and had them by heart, yet when I heard *The Idylls of the King* praised as if they were the final attainment of all poetry, then I drew into my shell, contented to think that I might be too stupid to understand.'¹

Bridges's sources, classical or other, he does not seek to conceal. Readers of *The Bacchae* will remember the chorus to which he is indebted when he writes:

Of all the isles of the sea
Is Crete most famed in story:
Above all mountains famous to me
Is Ida and crowned with glory.
There guarded of Heaven and Earth
Came Rhea at fall of night
To hide a wondrous birth
From the Sire's unfathering sight.
The halls of Cronos rang
With omens of coming ill,
And the mad Curêtes danced and sang
Adown the slopes of the hill.

And the conclusion of Milton's *Nativity Hymn* is recalled in

deep within the shadowed cave at rest
Lay Rhea, with her babe upon her breast.

Some lack of impulse is perhaps revealed by the presence of occasional lines which are utterly unlike his style, by being metrically bad, containing words carrying a stress they cannot support and one which does no work, or all huddled up (and not expressively): 'The weak, and pitying them send sweet Hope', 'Unwitting words pardon thou, and these who still'.

The fine ode, 'My soul is drunk with joy, her new desire', has been praised often, and deservedly. It is less fine, however, and less like Bridges than the ode which begins 'A coy inquisitive spirit, the spirit of

¹ *Dolben*, p. xx.

wonder'. Two choruses stand out also, by their special skill and beauty, the first of all, 'God of Heaven!' and 'I have chosen to praise'.

One other feature of *Prometheus the Firegiver* merits notice. Outside Milton's work English poetry contains no other comparable lists of proper names; for example, in the prolonged and beautiful tale of Io's wanderings—an intimate topography such as Pausanias would have been glad to ponder. Every name has its full sound value, and its beauty of allusion, exploited perfectly and completely. The poet brings out impressively the majesty of Greek mythology and its imaginative terror on occasion:

Him
The thunderer stayed not to deride, but sent
One blinding fork, that in the vacant sky
Shook like a serpent's tongue, which is but seen
In memory, and he was not, or for burial
Rode with the ashes of his royal city.

Of *Eros and Psyche*, which Bridges published in 1885, Mr. de Selincourt says, 'There is no more delightful long narrative poem in our language'. William Morris's rendering of the same story, in *The Earthly Paradise*, he remarks justly, 'seems heavy and mannered beside the swift movement and exquisite grace' of Bridges's version. Mr. Brett Young, too, considers the latter 'if not the best, the most beautiful narrative poem in English'. I think it may be.

There can be few poems of equal length so controlled in every detail. Psyche's adventures are divided over the year's four quarters, and every month has the exact number of stanzas as it has days. We might expect this to result in padding, but by skilful invention of just enough incident to fill out—not exciting or important incident, but in keeping with the dreamy atmosphere of a tale which every one knows—invention adequate, and meant to be adequate and nothing more—the poet spaces his detail well. There are, of course, occasional passages which seem strung out, but they are few, and there is never anything of the 'garrulous god-innocence'¹ of Chaucer, in such narratives as (shall we say?) *The House of Fame* or *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. From the striding march of the often-praised opening line, 'In midmost length of hundred-citied Crete', the poem moves as if always sure of itself and its goal, a traveller with ample time and a sufficiency of provisions.

Bridges was the last of our classical English poets, the last who could work deliberately as sure of his place in a stately succession. No shadow of our modern sorrows and perplexities falls on his pages; his theme

¹ Elizabeth Browning's phrase, of Homer.

selected, he writes at his ease a story which puts the reader back in a childlike age of acceptance of simplicities, where he must forget everything in his own time that shook belief and must forget much that goes deeper than any conventional belief. In this world it is not the story which is told that matters, but only the manner of its telling. The hearers are at perfect leisure.

The verse has wide range and variety, from lines as direct and swift as

Naked he goeth, but with sprightly wings

And now the sun was sunk; only the peak
Flash'd like a jewel in the deepening blue

to lines which have almost the infinite casualness and loitering pace of Spenser:

Which when in heaven great Aphrodite saw,
Who is the breather of the year's bright morn,
Fount of desire and beauty without flaw,
Herself the life that doth the world adorn;
Seeing that without her generative might
Nothing can spring upon the shores of light,
Nor any bud of joy or love be born

and lines which seem to carry deep within a beauty beyond their abundant surface grace:

The prodigal of an immortal day
For ever spending, and yet never spent.

Often all the quietness that ever was or can be seems to subside into one infinitely restful moment, 'Eastward of Ida, in a little town'.

Bridges's use of proper names, which we have noted already in *Prometheus the Firegiver*, has been often praised and appears again repeatedly—most elaborately in the famous stanzas made up of the names of her attendants whom Aphrodite summons:

Swift to her wish came swimming on the waves
Her lovely ocean nymphs, her guides to be,
The Nereids all, who live among the caves
And valleys of the deep, Cymodocè,
Agavè, blue-eyed Hallia and Nesaea,
Speio, and Thoë, Glaucè and Actaea,
Iaira, Melitè and Amphinomè,

Apseudès and Nemertès, Callianassa,
 Clymothoë, Thaleia, Limnorrhea,
 Clymenè, Ianeira and Ianassa,
 Doris and Panopè and Galatea,
 Dynamenè, Dexamenè and Maira,
 Ferusa, Doto, Proto, Callianeira,
 Amphithoë, Oreithuia and Amatheia.

Eros and Psyche is a succession of superb vignettes of scenery and of portraits of statuesque figures poised for action, the very tapestry of poetry:

Fair was the sight; for now, though full an hour
 The sun had sunk, she saw the evening light
 In shifting colour to the zenith tower,
 And grow more gorgeous ever and more bright.
 Bathed in the warm and comfortable glow,
 The fair delighted queen forgot her woe,
 And watch'd the unwonted pageant of the night.
 Broad and low down, where late the sun had been
 A wealth of orange-gold was thickly shed,
 Fading above into a field of green,
 Like apples ere they ripen into red,
 Then to the height a variable hue
 Of rose and pink and crimson freak'd with blue,
 And olive-border'd clouds o'er lilac led.
 High in the opposèd west the wondering moon
 All silvery green in flying green was flec't;
 And round the blazing South the splendour soon
 Caught all the heaven, and ran to North and East;
 And Aphrodite knew the thing was wrought
 By cunning of Poseidon, and she thought
 She would go see with whom he kept his feast—¹

a picture not unworthy to be set beside his astonishing lovely vision of the Virgin-Mother 'clad in green and gold' walking in the sunset-flushed apple-groves.

Eros and Psyche aims at artistic perfection, and sets itself no other goal; and in the class of narrative poems to which *Lamia* and *Isabella* and *The Witch of Atlas* belong it is second only to *St. Agnes' Eve*.

¹ Bridges tells us that this passage deliberately recalled the marvellous close of an actual day. In the opening of *Telemachus* Tennyson similarly commemorates what he saw of the atmospheric results of the Krakatoa eruption;

Had the fierce ashes of some fiery peak
 Been hur'd so high they ranged about the globe?
 For day by day, thro' many a blood-red eve,
 In that four-hundredth summer after Christ,
 The wrathful sunset glared.

V

THE DRAMAS

BRIDGES wrote also eight other plays in verse. The earliest was *Palicio*, written in 1883, the latest was *The Feast of Bacchus*, 1894.

These two, like *Prometheus the Firegiver* and even more plainly, were in the main literary exercises. As such I believe he ultimately came to consider them; I never heard him mention them. Their sub-titles sufficiently indicate what they are. *Palicio* is 'a romantic drama in five acts in the Elizabethan manner', *The Christian Captives* 'a tragedy in five acts in a mixed manner', *The Return of Achilles* 'a drama in five acts in a mixed manner', *Achilles in Scyros* merely 'a drama in a mixed manner', *The Feast of Bacchus* 'a comedy in the Latin manner', *The Humours of the Court* 'a comedy in three acts'. *Nero I* and *II* are of the orthodox Elizabethan kind.

Almost all are long by modern standards. Only *The Feast of Bacchus*, which is 1586 lines, and *Achilles in Scyros*, 1720 lines, escape this criticism. *The Humours of the Court* is 3150 lines; *II Nero*, 2724.

Dr. Johnson says, of *Cymbeline*, that 'to remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life', would be to belabour 'unresisting imbecility' and to attack 'faults too evident for detection and too gross for aggravation'. Long before it finished, as even some of Shakespeare's later work shows, the Elizabethan drama ran itself out in exhaustion. With their eyes on this worst possible model, nineteenth-century English poets produced a long sequence of stately and almost unreadable blank verse plays, to which nearly every major poet and many minor poets—among them Byron, Shelley, Keats, Landor, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Beddoes, Darley, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne—contributed. Elizabethan drama, apart from Shakespeare, they most of them knew at second hand, especially in Charles Lamb's 'Specimens', a selection of isolated finer passages which ignored the originals' abounding formlessness and clumsiness, their prolixity and constant violation of every sort of probability and artistic integrity. The later imitative plays belonged to the study only—their emphasis was towards the production of moments of poetical quality, and dramatic construction was left to look after itself. They lacked the Elizabethan drama's sources of strength and life.

Bridges rarely, if ever, went to the theatre, of which I never heard him speak. A dramatist is both born and made, and neither event happened in his case. His inspiration, in lyric so fresh and full, rose out of the natural world and his familiarity with fine literature, and not from his fellow-men. Also, in fairness to his plays and their want of dramatic strength, we must remember the bad tradition under whose influence, like the poets before him, and his contemporary Tennyson, he wrote.

As if aware of his lack of inventive faculty, Bridges spared himself the trouble of making his stories. With scrupulous care, at the end of each play he tells us where he found his plots or hints for plots, what he owed to Terence or Calderon or Lope, where he added to his original or departed from him. Ranging widely over European poetic literature, from every land and age he selected what pleased him, and in his likes and dislikes he never pretended to follow any guidance but his own. At Eton, for example, he tells us he was impatient of Ruskin's 'sermonizing, nor could I imagine how another could presume to tell me what I should like or dislike'. He kept deliberately to the themes and moods and patterns which he felt were peculiarly his.

In the upshot this was immense gain and gave his work its almost unparalleled integrity. But it was not gain when he wrote drama, which needs, even to survive for the student, to be in touch with the dramatist's own age, and little of modern writing appealed to Bridges, at any rate very little of modern poetry or drama. A further mishap has overtaken all nineteenth-century drama because technically drama has tightened and has grown stronger sinews by shedding so much that was utterly undramatic.

Invention, in any sense that the word can carry, hardly exists in Bridges's plays. His sleights and shifts are not to be criticized, you have to accept every outworn convention and assumption. Margaret, the heroine of *Palicio*, whose beauty has dazzled all masculine beholders and whose conversation does, at any rate in the action's earlier stages, light up into recognizable and individual wit sometimes, considers that she can mask her person adequately and easily, as Rosalind did in *As You Like It* (we are asked to believe, completely bemusing the lovesick Orlando):

I will put on
Some common clothing and disguise my face.

Margaret accordingly does this; and these simple trivial devices are held throughout Bridges's plays to be sufficient. Men put on beards or women's raiment, and walk their ways among their intimate friends without fear of detection. 'Asides' abound, and explanations to the audience, with soliloquies and deft slipping behind bushes, in order to overhear some

information that is crucial to the hider's conduct. We never escape very far from the generous trustful world of the charade. Humorous exchanges are made to a formula and by modern thinking not a good formula; and when a speaker drops into homeliness he can drop low indeed:

Frederick. Death! death!

Tristram. (aside)

By Gemini, this is a nasty one!

The Humours of the Court, I. 2, 406.

Except perhaps in the last scene of *Nero II*, where Seneca waits to be told that he must die and the writing is moving and beautiful in quiet elegiac fashion and has some dramatic quality, these plays nowhere rise to passion or feeling, and they are clogged with much solely conventional verse, Elizabethan in manner:

But when two hearts
Encountering in this mortal maze, have knit
Their preordained espousals, and together
In moonlight meeting and sweet conference,
Signed the surrendering treaties of their love.

The Humours of the Court, I. 297-301.

Concerning war,
I am divided in opinion, Abas:
But lean to think it hath a wholesome root
Supportive to our earthly habit.

Achilles in Scyros, 572-5.

'Tis plain to all, my son
Hath not the truth of his advertisement:
He wears the semblance only, such as lures
And flatters the deceiver. If I am vexed,
'Tis with myself. I looked for better things
And suffer in rebuff. That Menelaus,
The delicate, self-seeking Menelaus,
Should leave his easeful home to avenge a friend,
And that friend dead: and then the wizard tales,
Calypso and Proteus, and whatever else,
And worst of all this ancient beggar-man,
Who hath a tale better than all the tales!
Alas, alas! my son, thou wilt have need
Of much good care. 'Twas ill I did not send
Eumæus with him.

The Return of Ulysses, 1300 ff.

Perhaps the least dramatic play, where all are undramatic, is *The Return of Ulysses*, in which, until Ulysses returns to massacre the suitors,

nothing happens except words. Even its ostensibly lyrical parts, the lengthy odes of Phemius the Bard, are dull and undistinguished, and the jesting song of the chorus of maidens is too banal to be criticized.

Three plays have sometimes been considered to rise above the rest.

The Feast of Bacchus, a homely comedy partly translated from Terence, has an interest for the student of Bridges's prosody who wishes to note the stages by which he felt his way towards his later measures and, in especial, that of *The Testament of Beauty*. It is written in a new metre, which is skilfully handled and easy to read. That the result is invariably prosaic does not matter, since the writer intends to be prosaic:

To quote

From the very profoundest of authors, my favourite Sophocles,
Wisdom is far away the chiefest of happiness.

Of course a man may be happy, although he has lost his son,
If it cannot be charged to his fault. In spite of the best intentions
Menedemus is much to blame. Poor fellow, but I may assist him,
And if I can, I will. I love to help a neighbour.

Achilles in Scyros has been praised for fresh lyrical beauty, especially in the passages where the maidens' amusements are portrayed. These amusements are perhaps somewhat below their years, suggesting some degree of mental frustration, but readers have admired the grace and charm of the verse when Deidamia enters, leading Pyrrha (the unidentified Achilles) and the rest:

Follow me, follow. I lead the race. (*Enters*)

Chorus. Follow, we follow, we give thee chase (*entering*)

Deidamia. Follow me, follow!

Chorus We come, we come.

Deidamia. Here is my home;

I choose this tree: this is the ground

Where we will make our play. Stand all around,

And let us beg the dwellers in this glade

To bear us company. Be not afraid,

(I will begin) sweet birds, whose flowery songs

Sprinkle with joy the budding boughs above,

The airy city where your light folk throngs,

Each with his special exquisite of love,—

Red-throat and white-throat, finch and golden-crest,

Deep-murmuring pigeon, and soft-cooing dove,—

Unto his mate address, that close in nest

Sits on the dun and dappled eggs all day.

Come red-throat, white-throat, finch and golden-crest,

Let not our merry play drive you away.

No one will deny that these lines (they are followed by others of similar quality) have a slender fanciful charm. The whole picture is open-air and pleasant and the episode moves with a lively rhythm. Nevertheless, *Achilles in Scyros* belongs to a low form of poetic art, not quite the opera (for that revels in extreme infantile absurdity of plot) but the mask. The passage I have quoted, and lines which answer it in the maidens' chorus:

Ye watchful dormice, and small skipping shrews,
Stay not from foraging; dive not from sight.—
Come moles and mice, squirrels and skipping shrews,
Come all, come forth, and join in our delight

plainly derive from the Elizabethan drama, most obviously of all from Titania's speech to her elves before she composes herself to sleep. In this there is nothing strange, for the lesser poets of the earlier years of last century constantly attempted similar reconstructions, to revive a vanished atmosphere and imagery. Bridges, however, was not one of these lesser poets and he wrote like this when he was over forty. He took a long while to be sure of himself, except when he wrote lyric.

The truth is, the fable (which of course came from the ancient world, so that its flaws are not his fault) was unequal to Bridges's powers. Thetis has persuaded her son, aged sixteen, to hide on Scyros, disguised as a girl, to evade military service before Troy. Ulysses and Diomed, since oracles have declared that without him the campaign cannot succeed, come to find and drag him out. The King of Scyros' daughter, Deidamia, naturally has fallen in love with the boy she believes is a maiden like those of her train. It may be urged that other poets—Milton in *Comus* or *Lycidas*—have used conventional or even trivial tales as the vehicle of their art and thought. *Comus* I am prepared to admit as some parallel, though it rises into a world far above that of *Achilles in Scyros*. But as regards *Lycidas*, at any rate, I deny that the fable is trivial, and in any case Milton uses it merely as a framework and you are free to disregard it. Bridges, however, in *Achilles in Scyros* has nothing to tell except his story and pretends to no other purpose; therefore, if the story does not win esteem for itself or flower into sufficient nobility of expression, the piece fails. Rossetti is said to have growled out to William Morris, of Sigurd the Volsung, 'I never could take any interest in a fellow whose brother was a dragon'. It is not easy to take much interest in a boy Achilles disguised as a girl among rather exceptionally silly and undeveloped girls—or in a sea-goddess who describes her own maternal activities as these:

But I with frequent visitings assure me
 That he obeys; and,—for I have the power
 To change my semblance,—I will sometimes run
 In likeness of a young and timorous fawn
 Before the maiden train, that gives me chase
 Far in the woods, till he outstrip them all;
 Then turn I quick at bay with loved surprise,
 And bid him hail: or like a snake I glide
 Under the flowers, where they sit at play,
 And showing suddenly my gleaming eyes,
 All fly but he, and we may speak alone.

The revels of Deidamia and her train belong to the same nursery world, and Ulysses is the Big Bad Wolf seeking to break into paradise.

Traditional blank verse, expressing traditional poetic thought, in *Achilles in Scyros* Bridges handles as one expects a poet with his technical mastery to handle it. Thetis asks rhetorical questions that answer themselves, and she asks them adequately and colourfully:

Are rivers salt
 Because they travel to the bitter sea?
 Is the day dark because the gorgeous west
 Must fade in gloom, when the ungazeable sun
 Is fallen beneath the waves? Or hath the spring
 No charm in her pavilions, are her floors
 Not starred, for that we see her birth is slow
 Of niggard winter, and her blossoms smirched
 By summer's tyranny?

That phrase which Edmund Spenser uses so memorably,

For not to have been dipt in Lethe lake
 Could save the sonne of Thetis from to die

casts at least the memory of its cadence on the passage where Thetis tries to justify her coaxing of her famous son to his malingering:

Is not high Zeus himself, holding aloof,
 Worshipped the more? Let the world say of thee,
 When these have perished, that they went their way
 Because the son of Thetis would not aid them.

But the blank verse tightens from its fluency and rises to imagination in a seascape such as this:

'Twas such a breathless morning
 When all the sound and motion of the sea
 Is short and sullen, like a dreaming beast:
 Or as 'twere mixed with heavier elements
 Than the bright water, that obeys the wind.

And there is plenty of better verse than the overpraised descriptions of Deidamia's amusements. Here is a passage which seems to me noble. Thetis tells the girl she has chosen her to be Achilles' bride:

I am come to give thee joy, to call
Thee daughter, and prepare thee for the sight
Of such a lover, as no lady yet
Hath sat to await in chamber or in bower
On any wallèd hill or isle of Greece;
Nor yet in Asian cities, whose dark queens
Look from the latticed casements over seas
Of hanging gardens; nor doth all the world
Hold a memorial; not where Ægypt mirrors
The great smile of her kings and sunsmit fanes
In timeless silence: none hath been like him;
And all the giant stones, which men have piled
Upon the illustrious dead, shall crumble and join
The desert dust, ere his high dirging Muse
Be dispossessed of the throne of song.

The play contains also one fine ode, 'a Lydian chant in honour of music makers', very elaborate, skilfully woven—'The earth loveth the spring'. Other lyrical episodes, however, are not effective, and Bridges's frequent failure in non-dramatic episodes shows how ill at ease a great poet can be when he strays off his own ground. But in the blank verse of *Achilles in Scyros* he reveals enough of his genius to justify its partial exception from our disappointment, as being at least full of beauty, though beauty below this poet's best.

The third play which has been held to rise above its fellows is *The Christian Captives*. It provides Bridges's one heroine who approaches some semblance of life, and the play is rich in beautiful blank verse, always lyrical in quality, and contains also Almeh's song beginning

O delicate air, inviting
The birth of the sun, to fire
The heavy glooms of the sea with silver laughter

and contains also her later song:

If thou wouldst be my muse,
I would enchant the sun;
And steal the silken hues
Whereof his light is spun:
And from the whispering way
Of the enarching air
Look with the dawn of day
Upon the countries fair—

a passage which is introduced by one of Bridges' superb flower pieces:

Air, air! that from the thousand frozen founts
Of heaven art rained upon the drowsy earth,
And gathering keenness from the diamond ways
Of faery moonbeams visitest our world
To make renewal of its jaded life.
Breathe, breathe! 'Tis drunken with the stolen scents
Of sleeping pinks: faint with quick kisses snatched
From roses, that in crowds of softest snow
Dream of the moon upon their blanchèd bowers.

He is simply not capable of writing other than well, when he remembers flowers, the air, the sun. Yet the reader will feel that even this passage has a solely literary source and is mainly reminiscent; the poet is not on his native heath, for that heath is not drama, is not blank verse. Here is another flower piece, from *Palicio*, one altogether fresh and successful:

Margaret. This herb, I think,
Grows where the Greek hath been. Its beauty shows
A subtle and full knowledge, and betrays
A genius of contrivance. Seest thou how
The fading emerald and azure blent
On the white petals are immeshed about
With delicate sprigs of green? 'Tis therefore called
Love-in-a-mist.

Palicio. Who is this thistle here?
Margaret. O, he, with plumèd crest, springing all armed
In steely lustre, and erect as Mars,
That is the Roman.

Palicio. Find the Saracen.

Margaret. This hot gladiolus, with waving swords
And crying colour.

To sum up, as Mr. Brett Young observes, 'There is only one thing for which Bridges' plays cannot be disregarded, and that is the really beautiful poetry which smiles at one, like a flower pushed through snow'. They are likely to be kept alive as a storehouse of disconnected loveliness—sometimes just a phrase, or the movement of a single line, sufficient to strike out an image which lingers:

So long as shall suffice yon dying moon
To launch her young bark on the western seas.

The Return of Ulysses, 220-1.

Thick as the rooks, which from his new-sown fields
The husbandman a moment stays to scare,
Raising both hands.

Ibid., 209-11.

Your city,
 Approached by sea or from the roofs surveyed,
 Smiles back upon the gazer like a queen
 That hears her praise.

Palicio, 3 ff.

But often it is a passage of sustained beauty and imagination. The reader who is prepared to forge his steady way through all the plays can easily add to my final quotations others not much inferior:

You little think
 What charm the witching night hath for her lovers:
 How her solemnity doth deepen thought,
 And bring again the lost hellenic Muse
 To sing from heaven: or on moonlit swords
 Of fancy shadows in transfigured scene
 The history of man.—Thus, like a god,
 I dwell; and take the early morning cries
 For calls to sleep; and from divinity
 Fall to forgetfulness, while bustling day
 Ravages life; and know no more of it,—
 Your riot and din, the plots and crimes of Rome,—
 Than doth a diver in Arabian seas,
 Plunging for pearls beneath the lonely blue:
 But o'er my slumbering head soft airs of dreamland
 Rock their wild honey-blooms, till the shy stars
 Once more are venturing forth, and I awake.
 Is not that something?

II Nero, III. 2, 1393 ff.

'Twas last night, Sala, as I lay long awake
 Dreamily hearkening to the ocean murmur,
 Softer than silence, on mine ears there stole
 A solemn sound of wailful harmony:
 So beautiful it was that first I thought
 This castle was enchanted, as I have read
 In eastern tales; or else that 'twas the song
 Of people of this land, who make the sea
 Their secret god, and at midnight arise
 To kneel upon the shore, and his divinity
 Trouble with shrilling prayer: or then it seemed
 A liquid-voiced choir of spirits that swam
 Upon the ocean surface, harp in hand,
 Swelling their hymns with his deep undersong.

The Christian Captives, 332 ff.

I saw the sun, my slave,
Poising on high his shorn and naked orb
For my delight. . . . The birds at dawn sang to me,
Crying 'Is life not sweet? O is't not sweet?'
I looked upon the sea; there was not one,
Of all his multitudinous waves, not one,
That with its watery drift at raking speed
Told not my special joy.

Palicio, 1235 ff.

Bridges, Mr. Nowell Smith tells us,¹ believed that his dramas, if once produced, would hold the stage. Only *The Humours of the Court*, however, played by the Oxford University Dramatic Society in 1930, was ever acted.

¹ *The Times*, 23 April 1930.

VI

YATTENDON CRITICAL ESSAYS: *MILTON* AND *KEATS*

BRIDGES's close and constant study of his art resulted in three long essays which performed outstanding service—of a kind that has often established a reputation. He never cared about reputation, and they slipped into publication in characteristically casual, almost silent fashion, and made their way slowly, as one enthusiast made another. Never was discovery put through with so little fuss, and his quality as a critic is even now not recognized.

Two belong to this Yattendon period. The earlier first appeared as 'On the elements of Milton's Blank Verse in *Paradise Lost*', in Canon Beeching's edition of Book I of that poem, in 1887. It was followed in 1889 by a pamphlet, *On the Prosody of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes*. The whole was reprinted with additions in 1893, 'reviewed with insight by Laurence Binyon in the *Academy* of 10 March 1894 and, together with Bridges's practice as a poet, was the real inauguration of a new development of English verse, in which the natural accentuation of the phrase was to reassert itself, producing a fresh flexibility of rhythm'.¹

Those who believe that there is such a thing as 'poets' prose' will find Bridges's prose disappointing; only Matthew Arnold, among poets, writes prose of so consistently workaday texture. This is its outstanding and almost unique excellence. His critical gift was as individual as his poetical. But to express it he uses a prose which is all sinews, all cleanness and clearness, subtly proportioned to move without eloquence or the slightest trace of 'fine writing' until his meaning is all brought out. His temperance of statement makes his praise always memorable; there is nothing excited or florid, there is only quiet conviction based on evidence that has been sifted, all the material comprehensively examined and assessed before our eyes. He never grudges an infinity of bother—grimly aware that the reader's volatile mind may be bored, but aware that only by close following of his argument can that mind be made to see the truth, well worth a tedious journey.

But the journey is not tedious if you care about the same things; his search unveils so much that was never suspected yet is plainly present. I have said that Bridges as a critic goes his way without fuss (the word

¹ Nowell C. Smith, article 'Bridges', *D.N.B.*

is Mr. Kenneth Sisam's, used in conversation about Bridges's *Introduction* to Keats)—this is why, when we realize how utterly and finally the established findings of previous critics have been discarded, we are startled. 'I do not believe it', was the universal first verdict of a university class when I read his analysis of some of the hitherto supposedly ragged and 'unpoetical' lines of choruses in *Samson Agonistes*. But you have to believe it, for all is made pikestaff plain; and made plain subtly and unhurriedly. Novelty and heresy (hereafter to be accepted orthodoxy) are never once flourished; the evidence is allowed to build up its own conclusions. Bridges does not argue with you, for he did not argue, unless with his peers, who were few; his spirit, though friendly, was lofty and disdainful. But he does allow you to see fully the process of his thought and thesis.

He began his studies in Milton's prosody with a 'simple tabulation of Milton's practice in *Paradise Lost*, to which an account of the prosody of *Samson Agonistes* was added' (it is very like his method with Keats, when he forgets for the time being aesthetic considerations, and sets the *Odes* under a microscope, to see how they came together). The 'simple tabulation' is, as a matter of fact, a reasoned presentation of the results obtained by an exhaustive study of Milton's separate lines, so complete that in the end Bridges was able to state succinctly exactly what elisions or variations of accent were allowed by his predecessor, how often the rarer aberrations from practice occurred, and what rules governed his prosody. The method is scholarly in its elaborateness, but nowhere does common sense step aside for pedantry. Despite its abundance of what in other hands might have been an insufferable over-sufficiency of illustrative detail, the whole essay is a delight to read.

In the process Bridges proved overwhelmingly what he must have known before ever he started his explorations, that Milton was the first of our poets never to be warped aside from his awareness that he was an artist. His rhythm was 'always ready to follow his thought, a habit with him so essential to his style and so carefully trained' that when unusual action is depicted or a striking new motive emerges these are not passed over 'without some exceptional treatment'.

The purpose of all this strung-out prolegomena is to persuade my reader (if he does not already know it) to read Bridges's handling of the tremendous poem which before he wrote had been held to show Milton fumbling with the tools he had used too long and so often that at last (so critics used to assure us) his skill was at fault and his judgement unsure. Before Bridges effected what was nothing less than a revolution in our attitude towards *Samson Agonistes*, the common judgement was that of

Macaulay: 'We are by no means insensible to the merits of this celebrated piece, to the severe dignity of the style, the graceful and pathetic solemnity of the opening speech, or the wild and barbaric melody which gives so striking an effect to the choral passages. But we think it, we confess, the least successful effort of the genius of Milton.'

It takes time for a revelation to permeate obscurity, and longest of all, perhaps, for it to get through to what the inadequacy of language allows us still to call education. Even after Bridges had blown Macaulay's judgement sky-high, in English schools (including my own, in the last years of Victoria's reign) we were still being taught, in the careful exposition of the industrious Mr. Verity,¹ that the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* were immeasurably bad. 'One sees in them—*aut vidisse putat*—the uncertain touch of a failing hand.' As against that, Macaulay's condemnation is at least generously expressed, and with a tinge of remorse and hesitation.

I will cite three examples only, of what had been considered to be Milton's clumsiness and deadness of touch at last—with Bridges's comments:

^
*As one past hope, abandon'd,
And by himself given over*

'two-syllable lines, with extrametrical final syllables suggestive of negligence'.

O change beyond report, thought, or belief

'a ten-syllable line, metre reflective: the fourth foot inverted for wonder'.

No strength of man, nor fiercest wild beast, could withstand

'a heavy twelve-syllable line, descriptive of Samson's strength'.

After the way has been shown so convincingly, any reader with an ear can follow Bridges; and if he himself is what Robert Graves has styled a practising poet he can never again be rhythmically asleep.

Bridges never troubled about Macaulay, whom I am sure he had not read. He prided himself on a knack of knowing in advance what books were of no use to him and he did not waste time testing his insight. He had an attractively authoritarian manner of indicating when his ignorance had been deliberate. Dryden, for instance, was 'a poet with whose works I am by choice unfamiliar'.² In his *Keats* he informs us that *Lamia* shows 'an approach to Dryden's versification', but a magisterial footnote adds, 'So the critics say . . . I have not myself a sufficiently intimate

¹ Cambridge University Press.

² *Dryden on Milton*.

acquaintance with it to judge'. Of Mr. Verity his first and only knowledge came in 1924, when I drew his attention to this critic's opinion of *Samson Agonistes*, a kindly action which called forth a burst of dismay.

All such guides Bridges had summed up (1901) in his sinewy fashion:

The opinions which critics have ventured on the versification of the choruses in *Samson Agonistes* would be sufficient proof that they had met with something not well understood, even if they had never misinterpreted the rhythm. It is not less than an absurdity to suppose that Milton's carefully-made verse could be unmusical: on the other hand it is easy to see how the far-sought effects of the greatest master in any art may lie beyond the general taste. In rhythm this is especially the case; while almost everybody has a natural liking for the common fundamental rhythms, it is only after long familiarity with them that the ear grows dissatisfied, and wishes them to be broken; and there are very few persons indeed who take such a natural delight in rhythm for its own sake, that they can follow with pleasure a learned rhythm which is very rich in variety, and the beauty of which is its perpetual freedom to obey the sense and diction.

These sentences are the key to his attitude, which from now on was to govern his constant experimentation in the new and untested in verse. For the seeming pedestrianism of his method now, in analysing individual lines and showing how their movement corresponds to their content, he apologizes.

This attitude towards beauty of any kind is not the best, but I am not concerned with that . . . my undertaking . . . is to indulge it, and to put the reader into such a comfortable and assured state of mind with regard to the structure of the verse in *Samson*, as will enable him to encounter its rhythms with a good conscience . . . if I enable the reader to scan the verses, and, if he choose, count and name the metrical units, I may expect that he will then feel himself free to admire the rhythms. If he still cannot do so, that may be my fault or his, but it cannot be Milton's.

With this somewhat left-handed benediction he dismisses the more long-eared members of his audience to their own devices.

With the same close patience Bridges performed, in an Essay published in 1895, for Keats's reputation also an essential service. Not satisfied with what was the conventional and accepted explanation of the revised *Hyperion* as a watering down of a vigorous first text, by a mind whose powers were drooping, he compared both texts microscopically. As he did this, with a craftsman's approval and admiration he found that the supposedly weaker text was perhaps the most painstaking and clear-sighted effort ever made by any poet, to master and cast out his faults before he proceeded any further. Following Keats's thought, Bridges read his mind, as the former rejected a hackneyed phrase and changed 'poor old

king' to 'poor lost king' or rigidly rationed his use of invocation, an abuse to which Bridges's intimate knowledge of Gerard Hopkins's verse must have made him peculiarly sensitive.

But what admirers of Keats have most cause to thank Bridges for is the overwhelming proof he brought that the poet was determined to weed out inadequacies in his way of thinking and an unworthy attitude towards men and the world. This resolution to strengthen his work's intellectual content is clear in Keats's letters. But it was Bridges who first revealed it as actively at work in what had hitherto been taken to be a flaccid tentative redrafting. He sums up the style of the *Hyperion* revision thus: 'being evidently less mastered than in the longer poem', it 'might at first sight deceive; but it should not have deceived, for, in spite of the inefficient execution, it is in some respects an advance; it aims at a greater severity and has a more thoughtful power than any of Keats's other work'. Keats had ceased to be interested in his former aim to surprise by 'a fine excess'.

The essay is perhaps the most generous of all Bridges's critical estimates (and many are generous in a moving degree). No reader, not even Matthew Arnold (who handles it far less mercifully), could have been put off more by Keats's lapses in taste. But, unlike Arnold, he recognizes fully the decision which was at war with every weakness. Throughout his essay there is almost a protective attitude, as of an elder brother who admires intensely a brilliance and beauty of character and talent which he will not allow to be touched by hasty condemnation of trivialities which will soon be purged out of existence. Indeed, I think that Bridges is sometimes too kind to Keats's poetry of the second or third class, giving space and even high praise, not merely to *Isabella* (which it is still usual to praise) but to Keats's Epistles and some of the poorer sonnets. The great *Odes* he praises justly and finely, while noting their very unimportant small flaws—but for myself I wonder why he thinks so well of that to *Indolence*, and even of the *Psyche* Ode, and so little of the *Grecian Urn*. He was deeply stirred, however, by Keats's ill luck and his great courage,¹ and was disposed to see all that could be seen in any poem's favour. His opening sentences set out his reason for undertaking this study.

If one English poet might be recalled to-day from the dead to continue the work which he left unfinished on earth, it is probable that the crown of his country's desire would be set on the head of John Keats, for he was smitten down in his youth, in the very maturing of powers which, having already produced work of almost unrivalled beauty, held a promise of incredible things.

¹ The reader may remember what I have said of Bridges's sensitiveness to physical sufferings.

When Bridges has finished, he almost ends with apology, and quite unnecessarily, for what he feels has been occasional acerbity. He justifies it (if we admit that it was present at all) in a passage which, as well as any I know, gives us Bridges's own downright and manly (a favourite word of his) attitude as critic no less than poet:

If my criticism should seem sometimes harsh, that is, I believe, due to its being given in plain terms, a manner which I prefer, because by obliging the writer to say definitely what he means, it makes his mistakes easy to point out, and in this way the true business of criticism may be advanced; nor do I know that, in work of this sort, criticism has any better function than to discriminate between the faults and merits of the best art.

A great writer's faults, Bridges points out, are copied by his imitators; 'being graced by his excellences', they 'are confounded with them in the popular judgement'—an observation which every decade proves true afresh. And, 'if I have read him rightly', Keats 'would be pleased, could he see it, at the universal recognition of his genius and the utter rout of its traducers; but much more moved, stirred he would be to the depth of his great nature, to know that he was understood, and that for the nobility of his character his name was loved and esteemed'.

Perhaps I may be forgiven for feeling a special kindness towards this essay, because it was the cause of my first acquaintance with Robert Bridges. In the earlier editions he ascribed those celebrated lines,

like a dismal cirque
Of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor,
When the chill rain begins at shut of eve
In dull November, and their chancel vault,
The heaven itself, is blinded throughout night,

to a recollection of Stonehenge. They are, of course, a recollection of the circle near Keswick, which Keats had visited. The slip was so trivial that it seemed an impertinence and pedantry to intrude it on Bridges's notice. However, it vexed my peace, and at last I wrote to him from India about it. He exaggerated this tiny service and replied at length and went into other matters.

VII

LAST DAYS AT YATTENDON

As we have seen, with Bridges, one of the very few poets who have understood it, music had always been a passion. At Eton, 'It was my custom to go on short after-fours and sit in the north aisle or organ-loft, stealing out at the end of the anthem in time to be not very late for five o'clock school'.¹ He learnt to pick out hymn tunes and chants, and at Yattendon he took over the training of boys in singing. He has left this attractive picture of himself so occupied:

I was once induced to establish a quire in a country church, and among my first tasks I had to train the boys in choral monotone. They were naturally without any notion of educated speech rhythms. But there is no difficulty in teaching boys anything that you yourself understand; they can imitate anything, and love to do it. I had therefore only to offer the correct rhythms to their ears, and they adopted them at once. When we had got the vowels and consonants right, both to spare my own voice, and also because I preferred a model which could not suggest stress to them, I made the organ set the rhythms, and pulling out the great diapason I beat on it the syllables of the Lord's Prayer for the boys to pick up. There was of course nothing but boo, boo, boo, only the boos were of different durations: yet the rhythm was so distinct, it was so evident that the organ was saying the Lord's Prayer, that I was at first rather shocked, and it seemed that I was doing something profane; for it was comic to the boys as well as to me; but the absurdity soon wore off.²

He sifted also the hymns which the village sang. The result was *The Yattendon Hymnal*, which became influential and celebrated.

At Eton he had taken it for granted that he would enter Holy Orders and had been for a while a Puseyite. This mood can never have gone deep; he soon shed it, with characteristic ruthless decision. In his *Memoir of Dolben*, despite its tender affection and enthusiasm, Bridges speaks strongly against what he had come to look on as spiritual and mental unhealthiness. 'Among the poets he ranked Faber, a Romanized clergyman, of whose work I have nothing to say, except that a maudlin hymn of his, when Digby showed it me, provoked my disgust.' Of some of Dolben's own religious poems Bridges writes almost savagely:

The thought, as it was unhappily conceived, is unsparingly and untruthfully exaggerated: and the sacramental mysticism, with its accessories of candles and

¹ *Dolben*, p. xvii.

² *Letter to a Musician on English Prosody* (October 1909).

incense, is in keeping with the self-imprisonment of the thought. . . . The reading of these poems makes one see why schoolmasters wish their boys to play games, and one is forced to confess that writers, whose books can lead a boy of 17 to think in this vein of false fancies and affected sentimentality, are as poisonous as simple folk hold them to be.

'My temper', he tells us in the same *Memoir*, 'was impatient of controversy'; he could not understand how men have burnt one another for differing opinions, and (as we have seen) when his friend Sanday engaged in theological discussion Bridges thought it was all 'a fight in a cupboard'. I forget what the fight was about, and fancy my own sympathies would have been with Bridges. Still, Sanday, who was neither fool nor bigot, apparently thought it of some importance; and it may have been.

Bridges's own religion, free from mysticism or enthusiasm (using this word almost in its eighteenth-century sense), was steady and unruffled, while liberal and speculative. The speculation, however, must be pure from heat or excitement. In his faith, as in everything else, he was English of the English, Anglican of the middle way, by his own natural impulse, never resisted or questioned, equally indifferent to the sacramental forms of devotion and to the puritan and evangelical. As to sin, I doubt if he much believed in it, and he certainly fussed very little about it. I doubt if he himself were as orthodox as he thought he was, and I am sure it would not have troubled him to find out that he was not. He believed firmly in God the Father Almighty (to us that hardest of all dogmas to believe—I stress the *Almighty*): in the kindness and pity and gentleness of Christ. and in the ordered tradition of the Church by law established in England. This gave the world a norm, to which the only thoroughly wise section of mankind conformed from generation to generation. Others, whom misfortune of training or inheritance or their geographical remoteness from the centre of enlightenment had left outside this circle of satisfying simplicity and sufficiency, Bridges in tolerant moments partly forgave. But I think the forgiveness had always a certain temporary quality, and I say this because I myself sometimes got the benefit of it.

All this made for personal deep happiness and for the sweetness of temper and detachment from his own reputation and fortunes which so distinguished him, and were part of his unique integrity and unity of thought and emotion. No lover of his work would have had him other, and if he had been other something would have been lost from our poetry which exists nowhere outside what Bridges has left. Yet I think that by the exclusiveness of his Anglicanism he lost, or at any rate missed, something which had its value, even its artistic value.

Of this *The Yattendon Hymnal* is proof. As completed in 1899, it con-

tains exactly one hundred hymns. It is a tasteful collection, and an immense improvement (as almost any hymnal is bound to be) on *Hymns Ancient and Modern*; Bridges, as we should have expected, has shed some of that anthology's more salient fatuities. Yet he has planed away and excised much less than we might have hoped; and a deal of skimbleskamble stuff survives, possibly for the sake of the tune—a good tune, like a dish of strawberries, will carry off practically any accompanying ingredient. Bridges himself, using many Latin hymns, adapted or retranslated freely. In the process what may be gained in literary merit is sometimes lost in force and (not to burke the word) religion. For example, a beloved hymn, universally known in another version, reappears in this guise:

Jesu, how sweet the thought of Thee!
At thy dear name all sorrows flee:
But far above all joys that be
Is Thy presence and company. . . .

Jesu, Thou king of highest hest,
Whose triumph hath the world possess,
Exceeding sweetness unexpress,
All-loving, loved and loveliest.

There is no tongue can tell of this,
No book that writeth not amiss,
To love Thee, Jesu, what it is
He may believe who hath the bliss.

Simplicity surely passes into *simplesse*.

Bridges—no doubt, deliberately, for he did exceedingly little out of mere casualness—did not go far afield in his search for hymns. But he certainly must have sometimes strayed a little more widely than *The Yattendon Hymnal* suggests. One day, for example, I came upon him eating biscuits out of a tin with immense relish. ‘Abernethy biscuits, Thompson! Have some! It’s a—jolly—*good* biscuit!’ He lifted one flourishingly, and declaimed, ‘Here I raise my Abernethy!’ Then he added, ‘That’s a jolly good line! Every bit as good as “Here I raise my Ebenezer”! Silly line, that! How can you raise an Ebenezer? I prefer “Here I raise my Abernethy”! *You* raise one!’

To sum up, Bridges passed by, uninterested, a whole world of intense religious experience. *The Yattendon Hymnal* contains nothing to offend taste. But there is little to delight it, and nothing that could set the world on fire or turn it upside down—only gentle dying airs and falls, a monotony of sentiment and tone. It did a service, bringing into use again fine traditional tunes and helping the revival of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music. But of hymns, as distinct from their tunes,

there has not yet been much reform, whether Catholic or Protestant, Anglican or Methodist. Bridges's collection is suitable for use in village churches surrounded by a still unravaged countryside, but (I think) for use nowhere else. It will call up for posterity the portrait of this deeply learned and gifted poet and musician pulling out the stops of the Yattendon organ and teaching his quire of Berkshire lads to 'boo' to the rhythms of the Lord's Prayer.

Especially as the century drew to its close, this was a period of utter restfulness. His own want of wide fame vexed Bridges not at all; meanwhile he was living in the way that he thought a poet ought to live—careless of criticism and the passing follies of literary fashion—finding for himself what pleased him or helped him or guided him in the way that his *daemon* beckoned him—writing for his own judgement and no one else's—and writing as much or as little as he felt inclined to write.

But there is a desultory quality in most of what he wrote between 1895 and the outbreak of the First World War; his mind was not deeply engaged in it and the work of this period has not contributed much to his final reputation. He wrote an *Ode to Music* for the Bicentenary Commemoration of Henry Purcell; it was sung in Leeds and London, 1895, to music composed by Sir Hubert Parry, and published next year, with a Preface on 'The Musical Setting of Poetry'. He experimented in verse written in quantitative classical measures, and in 1899 he published in ordinary English metres *New Poems*.

While accomplished, *New Poems* is on the whole not up to his level of beauty and freshness. The current has been flowing smoothly, peacefully, and the rower has rested on his oars and let things take their course. Some of the pieces are mere versifying, certainly not worth reprinting. 'An Anniversary' is almost schoolgirl in quality, and 'Regina Cara' is doggerel, something into which Bridges lapsed hardly anywhere else in all his writing:

Honour, Truth and growing Peace
Follow Britannia's wide increase,
And Nature yield her strength unknown
To the wisdom born beneath thy throne!

In wisdom and love firm is thy fame:
Enemies bow to revere thy name:
The world shall never tire to tell
Praise of the queen that reignèd well.

I do not know what meaning the poet attaches to the line 'the wisdom born beneath thy throne'.

Everything else in *New Poems* is at least worthy of him. 'The Idle Flowers', the lightest piece of all, does what is all it sets out to do, which is to string together a sequence of wild flowers' lovely names:

Perennial Strawberry-bloom,
 Woodsorrel's pencilled veil,
 Dishevel'd Willow-weed
 And Orchis purple and pale,
 Bugle, that blushes blue,
 And Woodruff's snowy gem,
 Proud Foxglove's finger-bells
 And Spurge with milky stem.

A good field botanist, Bridges noted wild flowers as closely as his learned friend Lord de Tabley. 'Purple and pale' is not a rhyming tag, but is observation of the way that in boggy ground the ordinary spotted orchis runs to white sports. He knew the fields round his home intimately. I remember the justified pleasure with which he told me one day that he had discovered a root of *Lithospermum purpureos-caeruleum* close to Chilswell. He removed it to his rockery, an action which of course was wrong. But I reflected that Boar's Hill was now nothing but a rapidly congesting building blot; had lost its gageas and would presently lose its acre crowded with bee orchis.¹

New Poems contains one striking feature that appears for the first time and is to stay and strengthen. Bridges's memories of earlier years, which from now onwards are to find constant expression, are of almost unexampled vividness and clarity. The first of these expressions appears in his fine 'Elegy, The Summer-house on the Mound',² where his childhood is set out with an almost impersonal detachment.

'The Isle of Achilles', a translation from the Greek, is a lovely piece of accomplished verse, in a medium, the rhymed heroic couplet, which he hardly ever used. He disliked it because of its ease and, more especially, because poets who in his judgement were not more than mere verse-makers, had run it into a casualness close to formlessness. In his study of Keats he remarks that rhymed heroic verse

became heavier and less adapted for narration, and at last was cast mechanically in polished couplets which passed in a dull generation for a triumph of classic grace, and were prescribed by the Universities as the only form in which they would recognize English poetry.

Bridges is one of those poets who write best when beset with technical difficulties, so that the effort of overcoming them, as he says elsewhere,

¹ The field was ploughed up during the Second World War.

² Quoted in this book, pp. 2 ff.

gives the verse 'a powerful beauty', as when a strong swimmer strives against a current. He therefore rarely used the rhymed heroic couplet.

'Winter Nightfall', one of the most touching poems he ever wrote, is deeply moving in his own individual manner, full of a physician's understanding pity for bodily pain and weakness. Again, 'A Love Lyric' is all his own, in perception and tenderness. The poem on Eros provides perhaps his most celebrated felicity of unexpected adjective—'thy soft unchristen'd smile'. 'The Fair Brass' is as original as it is splendid: chiselled and clear-cut, nor is there anywhere, even in the work of this poet, anything more 'mere English'.

New Poems contains also some of his perfect landscape, including what is one of his best things in this kind, the marvellous 'November'. By preference he wrote of autumn. 'I *hate* spring!' he once exclaimed to my wife. 'All wet and cold and clammy!' 'November' concludes with the most imaginative single touch he ever achieved:

The long dark night, that lengthens slow,
Deepening with Winter to starve grass and tree,
And soon to bury in snow
The Earth, that, sleeping 'neath her frozen stole,
Shall dream a dream crept from the sunless pole
Of how her end shall be.

The century ended, but this somewhat static period stayed with him; what he was writing was largely experimental. It flowers continually into beautiful achievement and if it were the work of most other poets we should not feel disappointment. Disappointment is because the experimental process was solely metrical. The nations were changing, Victorian security and peace were passing away; on all sides, and even within English national life, new thought and passions were astir. If Bridges had possessed more intellectual curiosity and had acknowledged a wider range of ideas, even heretical and subversive ideas, as being at least of interest, he would have been a still greater poet. But his themes never exercised him as they should have done; eyes were on his chisel and the shapes that it caused to emerge, and he cared too little about the material on which he worked. This in no way mattered when he wrote lyrics or described the landscape effects which of all our poets he knew most intimately. But he wrote other poems besides lyrics, and, when a poet does that, thought and the quality of thinking—and the problems on which thinking exercises itself—do matter.

Thus, the poverty and complacency of his political thinking show up, on occasion disastrously, both in the *Poems in Classical Prosody* (collected,

1903—there are other pieces written in this period, and collected in *New Verse*, 1921) and in *Later Poems*, written between 1900 and 1910. It is not necessary, for example, to criticize his 'Epistle II, To a Socialist in London'; by quotation it devastates itself:

This wer' a downleveling, my friend: you need, to assure me,
 Fix a limit to the folk; else, as their number is increas't,
 Their happiness may dwindle away, & what was at outset
 Goal & prize, the provoker of all your wise revolution,
 Will by subdivision disappear in course of attainment.
 When goods are increas'd, mouths are increas'd to devour them:
 If the famine be reliev'd this season in India, next dearth
 Will be a worse.

Bridges was not the first to observe the enormous rise in the world's population and the problems this created; the fact was not as startling as he plainly expected it to be when stated in verse as casual and desultory as its content. But 'Socialism' made him merely angry, and his attitude cannot altogether be passed over, for he so often went out of his way to write about it as he understood it; even in *The Testament of Beauty* he trailed his coat and was controversial. When he did this he killed out his poetry, yet he attached importance to his argument.

Sometimes he trailed his coat in jesting friendly spirit, as with the present Master of Balliol. There had been a broadcast talk by a physicist who predicted that in ten thousand years organic existence would have died out, except for a prolixity of ants. 'What did you think of it?' asked Bridges. 'I thought it was rot,' answered Lindsay. 'So did I. But *why* did you think it rot?' 'Well, I can be interested in what is likely to happen in the next few years. And I am interested in eternity. But I really cannot get excited about a period of ten thousand years!' Bridges laughed delightedly. 'That's exactly—what *I*—think! But I never expected that *you*—being a Socialist—could have the common sense to see it!'

Later Poems, accordingly, reveals his growing intellectual carelessness and prejudices, the inadequacy of the subjects on which he was squandering his skill, no longer careful to write out of adequate emotion or perception and to preserve only what was good. It contains more poor verse than all the rest of his books taken together.

He was writing a good deal to request, and sometimes to be set to music. 'To Robert Burns' is merely unfortunate; nearly all poems by Englishmen to this great poet seem to be written in the kindly semi-maudlin fashion which appears to be necessary to please Scots readers. 'La Gloire de Voltaire' puts its challenge into the title, and still, after

forty years, so angers an Oxford scholar whom I know that he flatly declines to explore further in the work of a writer who concludes several pages of not good verse with the chuckling confession:

in weeding out my shelves,
In fatherly regard for babes upgrown,
Until they learn to garden for themselves,
Much as I like to keep my sets entire,
When I came out to you I had just thrown
Three of his precious works behind the fire.

I have touched on Bridges's handling of economic problems. His other considerable flaw as a thinker was his political casualness, which affected both his verse and his critical prose. When he wrote or read patriotic verse his insight flickered; as letters which have been published show, he could praise (and extravagantly) very poor lyrics if the author beat a sufficiently loud drum. Yet, when all that is faulty in either kind—as economic discussion or political statement—is winnowed together, it amounts to about the smallest amount of bad writing that any first-rate English author has produced. Nine-tenths of it was written at this time, the period of the Boer War and the morrow of the Diamond Jubilee.

'*Matres Dolorosae*', on the Etonian dead in South Africa, is the worst poem he ever wrote and contains his two worst lines. His *Peace Ode* belongs to the same vintage and was written in the same month (May 1902), to celebrate the finish of a train of events which he sums up, not altogether adequately, thus:

the Dutchman's implacable folly,
The country of Shakespeare defying,
Thought with a curse to appal the nation:
Whose threat to quell their kinsmen in Africa
Anger'd awhile our easy democracy;
That, reckless and patient of insult,
Will not abide arrogant defiance:
They called to arms; and war began evilly.
From slyly forestor'd, well-hidden armouries,
And early advantage, the despot
Stood for a time prevalent against us:
Till from the coil of slow-gathering battle
He rancorous, with full moneybags hurried,
Peddling to European envy
His traffic of pennyworthy slander.

The reader should turn to Thomas Hardy's little-known poems on the

same campaign, to see how differently two great poets regarded the events of their time.

An Invitation to the Oxford Pageant, July 1907, shows up Bridges's strength and weakness equally. He writes conventionally, of an ally, when he describes the Russian Navy's ill-fated gallant progress to what they knew was certain destruction, hopelessly outmatched and with the glare of complete publicity on every mile of their journey:

the chivalry of Nipon smote
The wily Muscovite, intent to creep
Around the world with half his pride afloat,
And sent his battle to the soundless deep.

The poem contains also full perception of Oxford's unique appeal to her sons by her beauty, in those days before it was ravaged beyond repair:

There is none holier, not the lilled town
By Arno, whither the spirit of Athens fled . . .
What love in myriad hearts in every clime
The vision of her beauty calls to pray'r:
Where at his feet Himalaya sublime
Holds up aslope the Arabian floods, or where
Patriarchal Nile rears at his watery stair;
In the broad islands of the Antipodes,
By Esperanza, or in the coral seas
Where Buddha's vain pagodas throng the air.

But why 'vain pagodas'? Yet one starts at the phrase only because Bridges lived to make himself indisputably the greatest poet, with the possible exception of Yeats, of an age which was a generation later. When he wrote his *Invitation*, to his contemporaries only the European world, and in that world mainly the ancient classical and modern post-Reformation English world, appeared interesting. 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.'

It was with some justice that by his writing now Bridges's fame, which had been slowly but steadily growing, began to suffer from a monstrous perversion of the truth. The impression spread that he was a poet who cared for nothing except technical accomplishment and wrote on overwritten subjects such as Eros and Psyche and Prometheus and Achilles—an impression, too, of fastidious delicate aloofness from reality, which in the last twenty years of his life was far removed from the facts. I remember the difficulty I had in persuading a well-known scholar who cared for poetry that Bridges really was a first-rate poet. He agreed at last, reluctantly, but nevertheless wrote, 'Is not much of his genius wasted on his themes?' In these years it was.

Yet *New Poems* and *Later Poems* are important, as containing poems in a freer and looser metrical arrangement than any he had previously used. No English poet before him had approached closer to sheer music, with every word essential and telling and yet of an almost ineffable lightness and brave gaiety. But he now gets closer still. 'Gay Marigold' seems as if anyone could toss it off, so simple is it in its ease—but it is the final achievement of an art which had long been consummate. There are also the Blakelike lines beginning 'Open for me the gates of delight': the touching grace of 'Sweet compassionate tears': the noble dignity of 'Gird on thy sword, O man, thy strength endue', the only poem he ever wrote which might be sung as a hymn: and, above all, there are two poems, whose gossamer exquisite texture makes almost every other English lyric appear heavy beside them, 'A Vignette' and 'In Still Midsummer Night'. These dispense with the last relic of any formal metrical chains or pattern. He had discovered for himself, and was slowly to teach a new generation of poets, that when the impulse was present the metre could be trusted to look to itself (under guidance of the poet's own *daemon*)—that it could even be the apparent negation of rhythm (as the counter of syllables on his fingers might think), when the rhythm within the brain was a floating inconsequent thing, evoked by a picture diaphanous and mist-suffused:

In still midsummer night
 When the moon is late
 And the stars all watery and white
 For her coming wait,
 A spirit, whose eyes are possest
 By wonder new,
 Passeth—her arms upon her breast
 Enwrapt from the dew
 In a raiment of azure fold
 With diaper
 Of flower'd embroidery of gold
 Bestarr'd with silver.
 The daisy folk are awake
 Their carpet to spread,
 And the thron'd stars gazing on her make
 Fresh crowns for her head,
 Netted in her floating hair
 As she drifteth free
 Between the star-blossoming air
 And starry lea,

From the silent-shadow'd vale,
 By the west wind drawn
 Aloft to melt into the pale
 Moonrise of dawn.

This poem is dated 1910, and by that time Bridges, as it shows, had found his way to the complete freedom which he was to proclaim in his first book after the World War, *New Verse*.

The same freedom lives in the best pieces, usually the briefest, of the *Poems in Classical Prosody*, along with pieces that are dull and dragging and uninspired. There seems little metrical justification for prolonged passages of this kind:

If from us all these things were taken away, (that is all art
 And all beauty whate'er, and all love's varied affection,)
 Yet would enough subsist in other concerns to suffice us,
 And feed intelligence, and make life's justification.
 What this is, if you should ask me, beyond or above the rejoicing
 In vegetant or brute existence, answer is easy.

As hexameters, Clough's¹ and Kingsley's experiments hold more of delight.

Yet even these pieces are lit up with Bridges's flashes of visualization or interpretative common sense:

(i)

blue calms of midsummer Ocean,
 Broad corn-grown champaign goldwaving in invisible wind,
 Wide-water'd pasture, with shade of whispering aspen.

(ii)

What was Alexander's subduing of Asia, or that
 Sheep-worry of Europe, when pigmy Napoleon enter'd
 Her sovereign chambers, and her kings with terror eclipsed?

I have an impression that Bridges found his experiments interesting but too indecisive to continue. The episode arose out of his always strong pieties, and especially his piety to Eton, his loved school. William Johnson Stone, a master at Eton, was his friend: their partnership (if I may call it that) reminds of the partnership, so soon and happily broken, of Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser. Stone was a man without sense of rhythm but aware of classical quantity. Bridges must have discovered this quickly, but he had made him a promise to test his theories, and 'his premature death converted my consent into a serious obligation'.

¹ Bridges later corresponded with Sir Humphrey Milford about Clough's use of the hexameter, in letters which I have been allowed to see.

One of the longer tests, *Ibant Obscure*, is a brilliant rendering of part of *Aeneid VI*. But briefer translations are lovelier, and are altogether successful:

Revenants

(from the French)

At dead of unseen night ghosts of the departed assembling
 Flit to the graves, where each in body had burial.
 Ah, then revisiting my sad heart their desolate tomb
 Troop the desires and loves vainly buried long ago.

The Ruin

(from the Chinese)

These grey stones have rung with mirth and lordly carousal;
 Here proud kings mingled poetry and ruddy wine.
 All hath pass'd long ago; nought but this ruin abideth,
 Sadly in eyeless trance gazing upon the river.
 Wouldst thou know who here visiteth, dwelleth and singeth also,
 Ask the swallows flying from sunny-wall'd Italy.

If I have sometimes seemed to judge austere, this is in keeping with Bridges's own practice and creed. I have also another excuse, which I have indicated. His poetry has now outlived the times in which it was written, into an age jangled with griefs and perplexities which his own never knew. Because of these two intellectual flaws it has already been assessed by hard standards, and if it is to surmount criticism and to have its great qualities recognized by all who write verse and care for poetry it has to be shown that its occasional failures are trivial against the sum of its excellence. Luckily, his weaker pieces are a mere handful, and his own judgement, though moving slowly, finally came to the opinion that perhaps they should be sifted out. He left verbal instructions that he wished all his verse to be reprinted except possibly his political verse, which he left to his executors to decide. He certainly became aware that there were new modes of thinking, which originated in and drew impulse from experiences from which he had been exempt; alien to his own 'universe of discourse', they might have their own validity. His opinion of the Boer struggle for independence, for example, changed sufficiently for him to dedicate his next book of lyrics, *October and Other Poems*, to General Smuts.

VIII

DEMETER. MISCELLANEOUS CRITICAL ESSAYS

IN 1895, Bridges had been urged by an impressive list of supporters to be a candidate for the professorship of poetry at Oxford. As might have been expected, the effort failed. The duties of the chair are light, but they involve some lectures, and these are usually on some theme which needs elaborate preparation. Bridges, who was by nature and choice a poet first and last, was never tempted by even his friends' persuasion into any activity which might have been a serious interruption of his real work. Critical essays he did write, from time to time; but they were either brief and had some special personal occasion, or else were concerned with the technique of verse and were written at careful thoughtful leisure, with a long interval before he took up some other subject which was a continuation of what he had been studying. No lecture-hungry generations, in North Oxford or in the University Colleges, were to be allowed to tread him down. He never wavered from his conviction that he 'was born for beauty and was made to rhyme'.

Nevertheless, his ties with the country were fraying and those with Oxford were drawing closer. In 1904, by invitation, he wrote for the ladies of Somerville College, to be played at the opening of their new library in June, his mask *Demeter*.

This is not a piece in which the poet extended himself. Many have praised it for lightness and grace, but the truth is, it is very unequal, and even when good is rarely strikingly good. It is destitute of invention of any kind: the two goddesses, Athena and Artemis, who accompany Persephone do this for no special cause that one can see unless to fill out the poem, and both goddesses whenever they speak are dull. What little drama and vigour the mask contains comes in with Demeter (ll. 365 ff.), who speaks with decision and colour (such as Bridges never fails to provide when he remembers wild flowers):

There shall be dearth, and yet so gay the dearth
That all the land shall look in holiday
With mockery of foison; every field
With splendour aflame. For wheat the useless poppy
In sheeted scarlet; and for barley and oats
The blue and yellow weeds that mock men's toil,
Centauray and marigold in chequer'd plots:

Where seed is sown, or none, shall dandelions
And wretched ragwort vie, orchis and iris
And garish daisy.

A still more vivid figure yet, she tells of her wanderings in majestic beautiful verse:

when the first night came
I lit my torch in Etna's flame.
But neither 'mid the chestnut woods
That rustle o'er his stony floods;
Nor yet at daybreak on the meads
Where bountiful Symaethus leads
His chaunting boatmen to the main;
Nor where the road on Hybla's plain
Is skirted by the spacious corn;
Nor where embattled Syracuse
With lustrous temple fronts the morn;
Nor yet by dolphin'd Arethuse;
Nor when I crossed Anapus wide,
Where Cyane, his reedy bride,
Uprushing from her crystal well,
Doth not his cold embrace repel;
Nor yet by western Eryx, where
Gay Aphrodite high in air
Beams gladness from her marble chair.

And even finer are mother's and daughter's description of the grim dismal region of the latter's imprisonment:

Demeter. The fruitless and unseason'd plain
Where all lost things are found again;
Where man's distract imaginings
Head-downward hang on bat-like wings,
'Mid mummied hopes, sleep-walking cares,
Crest-faln illusions and despairs,
The tortur'd memories of crime
The outcasts of forgotten time.

Persephone. Where have I been, mother? what have I seen?
The downward pathway to the gates of death:
The skeleton of earthly being, stript
Of all disguise: the sudden void of night:
The spectral records of unwholesome fear:—
Why was it given to me to see these things?
The ruin'd godheads, disesteem'd, condemn'd
To toil of deathless mockery: conquerors

In the reverse of glory, doom'd to rule
The multitudinous army of their crimes:
The naked retribution of all wrong.

And, like her mother, when she remembers flowers, she remembers them superbly:

Who taught thee else, thou frail anemone,
Thy starry notion, thy wind-wavering motion,
Thy complex of chaste beauty, unimagined
Till thou art seen?

If Bridges were now mainly marking time, he could at least show that nothing of his skill had been lost.

Nevertheless, much of the blank verse is lifeless, and the Oceanides' choruses mingle much fresh beauty and original rhymical liveliness with other passages that sink to such utterance as it is not easy to accept as the utterance of the Immortals, even under sudden excitement. If the reader thinks this judgement severe, let him glance over ll. 597 ff.

Demeter's real significance is that the poet was trying out new metrical experiments now shaping themselves in his mind. It contains some lovely new rhythms, as in the Chorus ('Lo, where the virgin veiled in airy beams') adapted from a poem by Blake, or in the Ode, 'O that the earth, or only this fair isle wer' ours'.

Bridges had formed a new friendship, which was to become increasingly congenial to him, with Henry Bradley the philologist. His own interest in language had always been great, and it was to be a major enthusiasm of his last thirty years. Bradley was working in Oxford, and his presence was another magnet which drew the poet to the city and especially to the University Press. In 1905 and 1906, for the sake of Mrs. Bridges's health Bridges and his wife spent nine months in Switzerland. After two years more in different places in England, in 1907 they settled at Chilswell, on Boar's Hill, above Oxford.

Creative impulse being low, Bridges was doing more critical writing than usually. In April 1905, he published in the *Speaker* his essay on *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Some of his incidental hits at this celebrated book are just and shrewd, but the study is crabbed and perverse. The gravamen of his complaint is such as to knock the heart out of a large part of world literature. Bridges begins by severe criticism of Bunyan's action in refusing to promise not to preach, as a result of which contumacy he was jailed. 'Separation from his wife and children was painful; yet, having the choice between silence with imprisonment and silence with freedom, his conscience forced him

to prefer the material fetters and leave his family to the charity of their friends. With so much knowledge of the facts', adds Bridges scornfully, 'we may now turn to the story.'

I do not think so. In times of persecution for conscience' sake, perhaps a majority of confessors and sufferers have theoretically had this choice between 'silence with imprisonment' (or the silence of death) and 'silence with freedom'. In Nazi-occupied Europe many, like Bunyan, went into the struggle, leaving their families to 'the charity of their friends'. Sacrifices which have saved the soul of nations can readily be represented, on Bridges's line of argument, as useless or even selfish. 'It is in the nature of things', says Bridges, 'that "babes" cannot share in spiritual convictions of adults, and therefore such convictions do not sever a man from his children, nor do they interfere with his duty of caring for them. The story asserts the opposite, and the only moral to be drawn from it is that a man should not marry if he would save his soul; but John Bunyan was married twice.'

No one had previously supposed *The Pilgrim's Progress* to be written as a manual of fatherly responsibility. One must think well enough of Bunyan's mind to believe that he saw what his critic so superfluously stresses: that, judged on the temporal plane (Bridges refuses to allow him to work on the spiritual plane, though this is the essence of the whole allegory), Christian should have stayed with his people. Bridges overlooks the share which Bunyan's family and their friends had in what was a communal decision, theirs no less than his. They believed that they were engaged in the only cause in the Three Worlds that mattered, and that it mattered infinitely and eternally; a beleaguered garrison in the stress of a hard age, they counted no price too high if they could endure to the end. The truth is, Bridges had no patience with any sort of nonconformity and took no pains to understand it. Bunyan chose not to conform, and this of itself stamped him as being what the orator Tertullus considered St. Paul, 'a pestilent fellow'.

After this personal judgement, Bridges proceeds to maul the story, which, 'bad in itself, is not excused or sustained by the allegory'. Christian leaves his family in the City of Destruction. 'It is a disastrous opening, for it deprives the hero of intelligent sympathy.' Yes, but so (one may feel) does Achilles' adoption of female dress, to escape a man's service in the field. So—as Bradley points out, in a book which at this very time Bridges was reading with deep admiration—does King Lear's opening exhibition of senile imbecility and fondness, when the old dotard proposes to divide his kingdom according to his daughters' flattery of himself. Without these postulates, not a line of *Achilles in Scyros* or *King Lear*

would have been written. If you insist that in every work of art the hero must stand forth at the outset as intellectually and ethically flawless, nothing of the least interest will ever get written.

Start, however, with other postulates. Let it be granted that an aged king can be such an unseeing ass—or a boy so subservient to a selfish goddess-mother—or a man in peril of eternal death so set on salvation as Christian was—and the rest of a story becomes possible, and perhaps the author will prove able to afford you entertainment by the way—even such superb entertainment as the apparition of Apollyon straddling the pilgrim's path or such beauty as the shepherd lad's song and the lilies of the Valley of Humiliation, none of which things appear to have interested Bridges.

But what is this key of Promise by which prisoners escape from the Castle of Doubt? Promise implies faith in the promise, and it is surely just the eclipse or lack of faith that they are suffering from . . . from the key being all the while in Christian's pocket, I conclude that this Doubt and Despair are a mood, which might pass off of itself as it seems to do. Now, in so far as this mood is corporeal or mental, it has its corporeal and mental medicines: or if Bunyan will regard it as spiritual, then the cure for those in this condition is sympathy with their fellow-creatures and the activity of good works; and his key had been better made of that metal.

'Dryden on Milton' appeared in the *Speaker*, 24 October 1903.

Bridges disliked Dryden; and what he knew of his work, which happened to be that work at its most casual and ephemeral, he knew largely by accident. 'When I read Dryden and Pope', he told once me, 'I said to myself—if *that's* poetry, then *I*—never want to write poetry!'

'Dryden on Milton' will arouse anger in our own day, when Dryden and Pope have swung back into high favour and are praised as almost our best and most accomplished poets. But on the evidence he examines, which is Dryden's modernization of Chaucer's supposedly clumsy verses and his contradictory statements about Milton's verses, Bridges's criticism is not easy to answer. His anger is extreme and he expresses it with a savage vigour that matches it well. Before the reader's indignation rises above all bounds, he should examine Bridges's judgement in the context which caused its severity.

My chief puzzle about Dryden has been to understand how, when he substituted 'epigram' and wit in poetry for romance and imagination, he did not see how monstrously DULL he was. He sinks to dulness of metre, dulness of rhythm, dulness of rime (of which he was most proud), dulness of matter; a dulness gross as his ruinous self-conceit; nor is it a point of disputable or changing taste and fashion, as some critics would believe; it is broadly demonstrable.

Bridges could not endure disparagement of Milton, by any one or at any time. There was something very noble in his care for the elder poet's fame. I remember his vexation after borrowing from me my copy of Mr. Eliot's essay on Dryden, which contains the remark, 'His powers were, we believe, wider, but no greater, than Milton's'. Bridges read no further. 'What does the man mean by saying that Dryden's powers were "wider" than Milton's? What right has a man to say a thing like that unless he explains what he means by it and proves what he says?'

However, let me again urge my reader (who possibly does not know Dryden's work as well as he believes) to look up Bridges's examples of the kind of thing that vexed him. 'Dryden . . . considered Chaucer a child in versification, and wasted many hours of his life in putting him into "numbers"; see now what his wit could do. From *The Knight's Tale* read this intelligent improvement.' Bridges cites a completely average sample of Dryden's work of 'mending' Chaucer's verses, and exclaims, 'This really is childish in expert, besides being poetically unreadable. See how fresh and masterly is Chaucer! . . . How could Dryden imagine that he was improving Chaucer when he was stuffing in all that stodgy padding?' In brief, though this was beside his purpose, Bridges shows convincingly that no age is anything like as wise and clever as it believes itself to be—the alert minds of any later age will have no difficulty in showing up our own pretentiousness (though they may miss our better qualities).

In the same year, he published, on 12 December, again in the *Speaker*, an affectionate study of his friend Lord De Tabley's poems. This of deliberate choice shows those poems at their best. Bridges admits that criticism of much of De Tabley's work

is easy, but if I wished to criticise I should begin by quoting a page from one of his own letters. He knew what his shortcomings were; and tho' that can now mend nothing, yet it half conciliates the objector. His poetry, where it is most successful, must please all readers; where it is less successful it disappoints his friends the most; for it appears to them like an incompetent portrait which only disfigures and wrongs the memory of the man as they knew him; tho' through all veils it reveals his lovely and lovable temperament.

Of a friend's work Bridges would not write unless to praise it; if he could not praise it he was silent. 'His friendship', like Dixon's,

was of the sort that will not see a fault in a friend. It was absolutely generous and ideal, and would admit of no abatement whatever. It was possible to inveigle him into just criticism, and intellectually he could be fair enough, but when it led to detraction it withered away and left his deep affection unaffected.

In November 1907, he published in the *Cornhill Magazine* a tender

and beautiful tribute to Mary Coleridge, who had recently died. He had an additional bond with her in the fact that she had been a close friend of Canon Dixon, who admired her verse as much as she admired his. Bridges writes of her poetry's 'brilliant condensation' and the 'profusion of imagination' to which it owes 'her justness and balance and the light touch which never dwells too long or labours on a reflection', of 'the intimacy and spontaneity of her poems'. It is to be noted that some of Bridges's best appreciation is of women poets, and his criticism is at its most understanding when he sets himself to sum up the essence of some personality he had known well. Mary Coleridge's poems

will be her portrait, an absolutely truthful picture of a wondrously beautiful and gifted spirit, whom thought could not make melancholy, nor sorrow sad; not in conventional attitude, nor with fixed features, nor lightly to be interpreted, nor even always to be understood, but mystical rather and enigmatical; a poetic effigy, the only likeness of worth; a music self-born of her contact with the wisdom and passion of the world, and which all the folly and misery of man could provoke only to gentle and loving strains.

Most of his occasional incursions into criticism, which nearly all fall within the years 1895-1910, had friendship as a stimulant; he wrote some of his best and most illuminating essays on poets who had been his companions. For another friend, Bruce Richmond, he wrote some of those long first leaders in *The Times Literary Supplement* which used to carry so much authority and were among the Second World War's casualties. Their anonymity was strictly guarded, but Bridges's authorship was obvious. He told me how a friend said to the editor, 'I see that Bridges is writing for you'. 'Richmond at first thought I must have given it away, but he said, "No, I spotted Bridges's style".' That style was not hard to spot—sparse and austere, and in its downright attack on its theme recalling Dr. Johnson's style (or John Wesley's) more than any other known to me.

He published in the *T.L.S.*, 21 November 1907, a light but sharply phrased appraisal of a dull and poor book, Stopford Brooke's *Studies in Poetry*, which was hardly worth a critic's trouble. Bridges, however, uses it to show up skilfully well-meaning and sentimental muzzywittedness for what they were:

regarding this volume as a representative textbook on the vogue of literary criticism, one may perhaps be permitted to observe that some of the ruts are deepening, and that there appears a tendency to supply the want of a true method by expatiating on doubtful topics and capricious notions, and to indulge in vague metaphor and semi-poetic language.

Bridges handles ironically and urbanely the docketing of romantic poetry as due to the influence of the French Revolution, Blake (whose lyrics preceded it) being brought within this category by being alleged to have 'anticipated it'; and the ascribing of a love of nature to 'Celtic tradition brought to London in Jamie Thomson's pocket'.

IX

SHAKESPEARE AND DANTE

A FAR more important study, his penetrating if somewhat capricious essay on *The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama*, was also published in 1907. It was written for A. H. Bullen, for Volume 10 of the Stratford edition of Shakespeare's works. It was reprinted privately in the United States in 1926, for Mr. Stanley Morison—the only book of Bridges's which was published first in America.

I have good cause to remember this publication. Bridges asked me to read through all his uncollected papers in prose, and to give my opinion about reprinting them. I fastened with enthusiasm on the *Shakespeare*. Having almost forgotten it, he seemed surprised at my pleasure and gave me leave to arrange for its publication. I did this and one day, talking with Frank Sidgwick in his office, happened to mention the essay and to say how delighted I was that it was going to be made known. The effect on Sidgwick was startling. 'Just one minute! I *know* that essay. I agree that it is first-rate, and I've had my eye on it for years, as a thing which should be republished. But it is *my* property! I took it over from Bullen, and I believe I have the receipt in this drawer!' He had, and pulled it out, a document which showed that Bridges had sold all rights for a trivial sum (fifteen pounds, if I remember accurately). This naturally quashed my arrangements.

One morning in 1926, however, Bridges (as was his manner) strode unannounced into our drawing-room and happened to meet me on my way to my study outside. 'You said you rather liked my Shakespeare essay. They've just printed a hundred copies of it in America in a rather special way and have sent me three for myself. I'm sending one to the King. I'm keeping one for myself. You can have the other if you care.' He tossed it down on a table. I asked him to put our names in it. 'Not with *your* pen!' He went off. This was not so brusque as it sounds. He wrote always with a quill—I have often come upon him whittling a point to a goose feather—and knew that I did not possess one. He inscribed the book later, with the proper implement—in red ink, since red ink happened to be handy.

The essay may almost be described as the Devil's Advocate's speech, in a case where the speaker is overwhelmingly certain that canonization is right and inevitable and intends to cast his own vote unhesitatingly

against his own side—yet feels that first an indictment must be made. Bridges's style, in its nervous virility, trenchant yet ironical, a neatness of wrist which uses rapier and only when rapier has done its work bludgeon—his economy of statement and conciseness of phrasing—makes each point apparently convincingly. In his sureness of his own power, he makes even this knit progression of argument read like vigorous talk. 'I feel that should I once allow Falstaff to come fooling into my essay I should never have done.' Of Miranda's quite uncharacteristic suggestion of her grandmother's possible adultery, Bridges remarks, 'This was a cliché of the time, and may be marked *passim* in Shakespeare. It was absolutely without significance, and thrust in wherever a fool might expect it.'

Yet it might have modified Bridges's disapproval if he had realized that Miranda's pointless innuendo resembled many jests of our own popular stage; in Shakespeare's day the theatre did also the work of our music-hall and variety show. Bridges read hardly at all in the lesser Elizabethans or he would have known how anaemic is Shakespeare's ribaldry at its worst, compared with what was common—for example, with the zestful impropriety of the catch which Thomas Heywood¹ makes 'brave Horatius' (who kept the bridge so well) sing with two companions about fair Lucrece. During the years of Bridges's middle manhood—when serious drama was conventional and dead and no poet thought of attempting any but verse plays which belonged to the study only—it is worth remembering that the music-hall was at its liveliest and preserved a vivid dramatic link with the people. Had there been a poet able to use it our literature might have had its Aristophanes.

Thus, when Bridges says that in Shakespeare's plays 'even the women are tainted' with an indelicacy pushed in to raise a horse-laugh from 'an audience far blunter in feeling than he would find to-day', he is much kinder than we deserve to our own audiences, who have proved repeatedly that they can take any toughness or grossness.² Mr. Brett Young remarks that Bridges, 'born into an age which worshipped the proprieties to a positively indecent extent', had a 'puritanism' which was 'uncompromising'. That is so. Bridges was not in the least squeamish in private talk and would use the most unexpected words if they were the right words; he never picked about for others more delicate but less expressive. But he disliked coarseness or suggestiveness in literature as signs of mental sickness or poverty of interests. 'Do you know anything

¹ In *The Rape of Lucrece*.

² The music-hall, 40 years ago, was, of course, far freer from impropriety than it is now. But it would have seemed sufficiently indelicate to Bridges.

about this fellow they are giving an honorary degree to?' he once asked Gilbert Murray, when he had been invited to meet at the Encaenia lunch a distinguished French author. 'Is he a *dirty* fellow?' 'I said, Yes, I thought that on the whole he *was* rather a dirty fellow.' 'Then I'm—*not* going to meet him.' This attitude will hardly call out much sympathy to-day—yet I think nearly all of it was justified, from the standpoint of Bridges's own unwavering resolution to make every work of art as perfect as he could.

Mr. Brett Young—answering Bridges's explanation of 'the taint' he found in Shakespeare, often without any sort of necessity, dramatic or other, as due to the fact that Shakespeare 'was making concession to the most vulgar stratum of his audience, and had acquired a habit of so doing'; and this supposition is confirmed by the speech of Hamlet to the players, where Shakespeare has put his own criticism into Hamlet's mouth—observes:

Even admitting that some of Shakespeare's clowning scenes are foolish; that his brutality is a survival out of darker days, his lewdness flung contemptuously at an audience of lackeys, without these things we should feel that he had lost something of breadth and universality. Some people might possibly respect him more: many would certainly love him less.

Bridges's own dramas would be stronger with (not coarseness—for I agree with his judgement that Shakespeare's women, and even Ariel, lose some dramatic quality by being 'tainted', solely to please the fool in the audience—but) some touch of existence less rigorously refined out of all contact with reality.

Yet Bridges is surely right when he finds inexcusable the setting of so delightful a creature as Imogen in a story which is both gross and grotesque: and artistically unforgivable Shakespeare's idea that it is funny to let her mistake for her lover that truncated ass Cloten. Also, though sheer prejudice against Falstaff comes out when he says 'in the sudden dismissal, "I know thee not, old man," I hear rather the triumphant farewell of Shakespeare than the angelic judgement of Henry', Bridges is justified in finding an error of dramatic as well as ethical taste in Falstaff's 'desecration of Hotspur's body and the Prince's connivance in his contemptible pretence to have killed him'.

On Bridges's other criticisms readers will form their own opinions. Many will disagree with what he says about the machinery of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. As he points out, A. C. Bradley had recently anticipated him here,¹ and Bridges gracefully uses Bradley's nobly expressed enthusiasm to

¹ In *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

excuse himself for writing what he confesses is almost solely an examination of Shakespeare's faults of construction and taste. It is certain that this speech for the prosecution—by a counsel aware that conviction is neither possible nor desirable—must be considered. It needed to be made and it was time that it was made, to save Shakespeare's fame from the harmful idolatry then in vogue and present in even so great a book as Bradley's, and absurdly present in another book of that period, Brandes's *Shakespeare*. Though Bridges ostensibly treats one theme only, he gets in more sanity and enlightenment than almost any equal number of pages of Shakespearian criticism known to me, outside Johnson's; some of the most admired essays on Shakespeare are not much more than a sequence of pious ejaculations. Bridges concludes, of what 'is little more than the contracted outline of a one-sided contention',

How far it may convince critics and readers I cannot tell. Those who agree will easily draw some practical corollaries; one of which I think useful enough to be formulated, namely, that Shakespeare should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that, if out of veneration for his genius we are led to admire or even tolerate such things, we may be thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience, and learning contamination from those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist.

In 1908 and 1909, two *T.L.S.* leaders revealed Bridges's ease with any theme that interested him. Over George Darley he took more pains than he sometimes did, but I still think the subject hardly adequate to them. Of Darley's 'temper and habits we have a faithful picture, for he describes himself with ingenuous insight'. *Sylvia* 'is interspersed with songs, some of Elizabethan type, and tho' we cannot say that the best of them are as good as Shakespeare, they are good enough, and run up alongside their model with a childish confidence'.

Dante in English Literature does not do much more than strike out illuminating comments which are not followed up.

The best method of inquiry would perhaps be such as one would use in music; that is, first to determine what qualities and effects an original genius had introduced; and then observe how the later men had climbed on his shoulders. But even in such a question as what Milton owed to Dante the difficulties are insuperable, and the difference of their material obscures the issue. In such a formal matter as versification who can say that it was not Dante's rime that determined Milton to eschew rime, while the example of his prosody led him to copy his elisions and bold rhythms as far as he dared? In the great matter of artistic

style and handling, in which Dante is so supreme, it is difficult to distinguish Milton's debt to him from his debt to Virgil.

In 1909 Bridges published his selection from Dixon's verse, to which Hopkins first introduced him. It is prefaced by a surpassingly sympathetic appreciation, whose conclusion, as was his manner when he summed up a friend's character and achievement, shows his stately and justified sense of an 'occasion', his quiet prose once in a while deliberately exerting itself to an assessment whose carefully measured phrasing makes it memorable. Bridges never fails to reach his aim, though his success is in no degree less in many other passages where he is memorable by the way and without any conscious effort. Dixon, he remarks—and this essay throughout has a quality of veneration which deepens the force of the affection which lives in it—

was truly revered, and where he bestowed his affection the gift was so unmeasured that the mere flattery of it must have been injurious, were it not that spiritual love has no excess, but is always beneficent. It was more than any one could repay, and, however I have rejoiced in it, the remembrance, now that he is taken away, shames me with the thought of my unworthiness.

X

OXFORD. THE WAR

BRIDGES's house, Chilswell, was at the very heart of the enchanted country dedicated to the Gipsy Scholar; the name is that which Arnold (I believe, in error) spelled as Childsworth: 'Runs it not here, the track by Childsworth Farm?' At the poet's gates was the wood which (no longer) 'hides the daffodil'; a few yards' walk gave an uninterrupted view to 'the fir-topped Hurst'. Bridges owned a small strip of forest which began the Youlbury woods of Sir Arthur Evans, in their season a sheet of bluebells. 'It's awfully jolly', he once observed to me, 'to be able to walk right out into these bluebells.' Nightingales, which have now gone, abounded well into the 1920's; I remember how they used to sing all about us when we were rehearsing *Good Friday* in Masfield's theatre, a quarter of a mile away from Chilswell. The red squirrel still was common in 1924, and the grey did not drive it out until a year or two later.

From Chilswell the eye travels down to Oxford's towers, a glorious sweep. 'Weren't you lucky!' my wife once exclaimed. 'Luck!' Bridges growled. 'It wasn't *luck*!' It had been the deliberate choice of the eyes which in all England were the best trained to appreciate our southern landscape.

His quickest and shortest way into Oxford was not through the long and rapidly growing suburb of Boar's Hill, but across the fields to Ferry Hinksey, an easy walk for the athletic poet. Another attraction of this path was that he could drop in on Sir Walter Raleigh, who lived just above the ferry. Boar's Hill itself rarely saw him. His furthest range certainly did not extend beyond the present bus terminus. Beyond that was barbarian territory, and he kept to his region of woodland. To Ferry Hinksey was the road which meant the least trudging through built-up land. If the ferryboat happened to be the wrong side, Bridges did not always bother to shout for it. At least once, when he was over seventy-five, he merely waded, carrying his trousers, since the water comes up to your waist.

He never stood any nonsense from physical infirmities. Rebuking me with some austerity (for drinking cider at lunch instead of beer), he remarked in 1914, 'I've always b'lieved—in living a man's life!' When over eighty, he had a tooth extracted and refused even a local anaesthetic. When he dropped in on me to discuss some matter, he often not merely

refused to come indoors (he almost seemed to distrust being within four walls) but of choice lay flat on the ground and talked looking upwards. I have known him do this after heavy rain had made the stone before our front door, which was worn into concavity, into a shallow scoop filled with water. Bridges's back got soaked but this did not bother him; he knew of rheumatism only by hearsay. If he wanted to rest he rested, and he never troubled as to whether the soil were dry or damp. One's memories of him see him constantly so, seated on the earth. I remember, when canoeing on the river, turning a bend by the Oxford Botanic Gardens and coming face to face with him on the bank at the waterside.

In these pre-war years he was in no hurry about writing more verse. It would come, and meanwhile he was seeking new forms. 'The better a man writes now,' he told me in 1914, 'the worse he writes. The old forms are worn out. We have got to find new ones. We shall find them.'

He had other interests, which for the time being crowded out poetry. He constantly met Henry Bradley, of his friendship with whom he later published so noble and intimate a memorial. This roused to a flame his care for philology, henceforward a major concern, and in 1913, with Bradley, Raleigh, and Logan Pearsall Smith, he founded the Society for Pure English, a project first discussed in January of this year. The War 'postponed its activity until 1919'.¹ In 1923, George Gordon and Kenneth Sisam joined its originators.

The Society's title was much misunderstood. Bridges never stood for a pedantic unchanging use of language, but desired only that a close watch should be kept lest elements alien to its spirit were allowed to wreck its character. He was capable of a lofty carelessness himself on occasions. In his *Memoir of Dolben* he writes, 'I was also abhorrent towards Ruskin', which cannot mean what it says; and I was always a little surprised by the fact that he spelled 'Xmas' for 'Christmas', which somehow I should not have expected. But a flood of popular vulgarization was now obviously on us, and he cared about purity, in the sense of health and continuity. Blunden's first book of poems interested him greatly—he wrote an S.P.E. paper on them—not merely by their merits (which he admits and then dismisses), but mainly for their rich dialect words.

It is a picture, preserved for us in Bradley's letters, which to our own harassed age seems like a vignette of the Golden Age, to look back to those quiet years when the poet and his friends could meet in the way Milton liked to meet Cyriac Skinner, for a neat repast in some Oxford common room, followed by a discussion of some matter remote from

¹ Logan Pearsall Smith, *Memories of Robert Bridges*: S.P.E. Tract xxxv.

everything in the world except the future of English literature. Mr. Pearsall Smith has preserved for us almost the very tones of Bridges's voice as he rejected a proposed new member. 'He's a windbag and Socialist, a vegetarian—he's a pro-Boer; he writes filthy prose.' The Society 'sprang into existence from Mr. Bridges' head like Athena from the head of Zeus'. 'From the beginning he planned its policy, chose its collaborators, and guided its destiny, and wrote its most important papers.' Yet it owed almost as much to Mrs. Bridges's 'clear and fine judgement'.¹ The careful collator of her husband's verse and prose, in her own beautiful handwriting she presently gave formal shape to the new letters which he introduced into the alphabet (or, at any rate, into the reprinting of his own prose papers). His debt to his wife—a debt which he rejoiced to acknowledge—was one beyond measure. She knew his mind and work so intimately that constantly, when some question arose, she found the right way and laid that question to rest.

In 1912 Bridges published (*T.L.S.*, 29 February) a study of *Wordsworth and Kipling*. Wordsworth is present only intermittently, summoned at the outset for immediate and not very respectful dismissal, and recalled occasionally afterwards. 'No poet ever took himself more seriously . . . however wide his outlook, he lived as a sectary in a closed system, and imagined that whatever he happened to think was of primary importance.' Bridges speaks scornfully of 'his copious and throttling neckcloth', and remarks, 'Wordsworth would not stand very high in a list of English authors ranked according to the importance of their vocabularies'. As to Wordsworth's opinions on 'poetic diction', 'we should say that the main actual significance of the debate was that poetic diction should be living'.

Bridges then turns to Kipling, who used freely 'the idioms and actual converse of common folk'. Incidentally he states tersely an opinion which shows how his mind was now exercised:

any one may see that serious rime is now exhausted in English verse, or that Milton's blank verse practically ended as an original form with Milton. There are abundant signs that English syllabic verse has long been in the stage of artistic exhaustion of form which follows great artistic achievement. Now as far as regards the verse-form Wordsworth was apparently unconscious of this predicament. It never occurred to him that he was working with blunted tools.

That pronouncement incidentally sheds a flood of light on Bridges's own practice and attitude; he all but dismissed the whole of nineteenth-century poetry, after Keats and Shelley—except for a very few poets who were either his own friends or for some special reason stirred him—as of extremely secondary merit. Those poets 'worked with blunted tools'.

¹ Logan Pearsall Smith, *Memories of Robert Bridges*.

He saw, of course, the beauty of Tennyson's early lyrics, but his public he brushed aside as 'an audience whom Tennyson educated to be specially observant of blemishes, and who came to regard finish as the one satisfying positive quality'.¹ It was practically impossible to interest Bridges in any writer who he decided in advance was not interesting, and in coming to his critical conclusions he trusted his instinct absolutely.

As for contemporaries, it was only by accident or caprice that he ever became aware of a man's verse, and his occasional pronouncements on the poets of his time, though often very much to the point and so amusing that it is a pity they cannot be quoted, were almost always those of dismissal. There was nothing of personal or petty feeling in this; it just happened that Bridges did not like their work or felt sure that he would not like it even if he knew it. Still, I think he lost something by this sufficiency and assurance. When he did come across a really striking poem by a contemporary he could see its merit. For example, I showed him Belloc's famous *Lines on a Don*; they so delighted him that for weeks Bridges recurred to them constantly. 'If I had known the poem I should have put it in my *Chilswell Book of Verse*.' He used to quote the first line of Herbert Palmer's *The Unknown Warrior Speaks at His Tomb*, observing that it was astonishingly fine: 'Look in my face; my name is Sacrifice!' The poem is a noble one. Yet I wondered if Palmer (who has read all English poetry) unconsciously recalled Rossetti's 'Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been'. But Bridges had never read Rossetti.

I have strayed from *Wordsworth and Kipling*. A brief, almost scrappy study, it nevertheless abounds in insight, for he cared for Kipling, preferring him to Wordsworth and praising him with enthusiasm; 'he can take pains with nothing without in some way distinguishing it'. What pleased Bridges was not merely Kipling's vigorous use of common diction but, still more, his excellent skill in using ordinary rhythms and many which were traditional and part of folk-poetry. Thus, of *The Looking Glass* (in *Rewards and Fairies*), he observes 'In this masterly poem the motive is heroic and almost tragic . . . the picture is done with such force that many readers will have the four stanzas by heart when they have read them twice'. Bridges then proceeds to note that the line, 'The Queen was in her chamber, and she was middling old',

is of course founded on 'The Queen was in her parlour eating bread and honey', and the key of the emotion is thus deliberately pitched at the level of the non-sensical nursery rime. Observe, too, the expression 'middling old'. This sets the Queen down among the homeliest of her subjects; but in so doing it may

¹ *Memoir of R. W. Dixon*, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

humanize and provoke common sympathy . . . the whole has an irresistible force, so that our dislike of the incongruities, if we feel any, is overpower'd.

Wordsworth, however, gets a word of approval at the end, for his picture of Newton's statue:

The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

'Mr. Kipling's method seems to shut him out from such heights. We do not remember anything of this quality in his poems.'

In a fine (but far too brief) essay on *The Poems of Emily Brontë* (T.L.S., 12 January 1911), Bridges set vigorously about their editor, whose interest had confessedly been almost solely that of a bibliographer who happened to collect Brontë manuscripts. The *Poems*' purchaser 'may be congratulated on having a book which it will be hard to rival for misprints and wrong readings; they are incredible. That any one should have kept Emily Brontë's poems in his desk for years, and should then apologize for publishing them¹ . . . is a piece of magnificent *insouciance*.' Bridges himself has in recent years been heavily censured by later critics for what they regard as a similar casualness in keeping Gerard Hopkins's poems in his own desk for decades and then (they allege) apologizing for them. I hope to deal with this charge in its place.

In at least one poem, Bridges has effected a masterly readjustment of Emily Brontë's work and put together two disconnected fragments which make a most moving whole; and in less than ten pages he has, while admitting her technical shortcomings, showed how little they matter and how great is her quality. 'The beauty in her work is that which comes of bare truth and insight rather than of aesthetic handling and ornament.' Some might have expected that a writer so casual in her method, willing to throw in almost any word sometimes if it caught her eye as a rhyme to one already present, might have met with scant appreciation from a poet whose own style was so careful and impeccable. But this is not so.

Indeed, a near acquaintance with her poems—which with few exceptions are the plainest revelation that she can make of herself—brings one to give the same value to her commonest expressions that one gives to the most consummate artistic diction. Never was there a poet who so much requires to be kept apart from others, away from conventional contagion; and when one has got accustomed to her voice it is wonderful what a range it covers, and how various are her successes.

While Bridges was living at Yattendon, Sir Henry Newbolt had predicted that his house would one day become a place of pilgrimage. Chils-

¹ The words I omit are 'and not take the trouble to print them correctly'.

well became one now. Among those who often visited him was Mr. Asquith. They did not agree politically. 'You know, Asquith really believes in all this democracy stuff,' observed Bridges to me in 1914. 'One man one vote, and all that sort of thing. But as for me—I say—it's all damned nonsense!'

Disagreement, however, did not affect Asquith's admiration for fine poetry, and in 1913 Bridges was offered the post of Poet Laureate. The last Laureate, Mr. Alfred Austin, had not been highly esteemed, and there had been much argument as to whether he should have a successor. Many names had been suggested, but Bridges's name hardly ever. 'All right', he answered, when sounded as to his willingness to accept the laureateship if asked. 'But there must be no damned nonsense of knight-hoods or anything of that kind.' On this understanding he accepted it. His response was tactlessly quoted where it should not have been, and in 1928 for a time it rather blocked his appointment to the Order of Merit. It had been misunderstood as a personal message. 'He sent word that he wanted no damned nonsense of knight-hoods or anything of that kind.' The O.M., however, was not 'of that kind'.

His unexpected appointment made his name swim up into the news. Bridges saw to it that it quickly sank out of the news again. 'We went specially away', he said reminiscently, 'and arranged to get in a girl from the village who was stone-deaf, to answer the door. They told us that reporters came streaming up from Oxford. But that girl soon cured them. Now they leave us alone.'

Bridges ascribed his appointment to the success which had come to him, late in life, by the action of the Oxford University Press. In 1912 Humphrey Milford, in a memorandum to his chief, stressed the absurdity of not having in their 'Oxford Poets' 'the finest English lyric poet since Shelley'. The transfer of his books, which had sunk to very low circulation, was arranged, and in the first year his new publishers sold 27,000 of the Oxford one-volume *Bridges*. 'M-milford!' said Bridges. 'You've m-made me—L-laureate'. He hesitated to accept the appointment, and accepted it largely because he felt he owed it to his publishers, who had made his name widely known. 'So the fire burnt the stick,' he wrote to Milford, 'and the stick beat the pig, and the pig got over the stile.'

Bridges took up his post in His Majesty's Household with old-fashioned grace and loyalty. *The Spirit of Man* was dedicated to the King, as was later *The Testament of Beauty*, and now, to mark his appointment, Bridges wrote his beautiful Christmas poem, *Noel*.

He had found the new verse forms he had been seeking, and tells us how he found this first one:

One cannot originate a poem in an unknown metre, for it is familiarity with the framework which invites the words into their places, and in this dilemma I happily remembered that I had had for many years a poem in my head which had absolutely refused to take any metrical form. Whenever I had tried to put it into words the metre had ruined it. The whole poem was, so far as feeling and picturing went, complete in my imagination, and I set to work very readily on it, with intense interest to see what would come. I was delighted to find that the old difficulty of metering it had vanished, and it ran off quite spontaneously to its old title, *The Flowering Tree*. . . . Having exploited it as I thought successfully, and arrived at very rich and varied rhythms, it was after that single experiment a very definite form of marked effects and possibilities which I could use now at will; or, at least, it was ready within me to receive or reject anything that arose. And on Nov. 28th, when I had been considering whether I would send His Majesty a Christmas Poem to commemorate my appointment in his household, the poem called *Noel* appeared on the scene.¹

The King sent it to *The Times* for publication, and 'it won more favour from all classes of people than any other poem that I ever wrote'.

In June 1914, I was in England for a month, on a flying visit from India, and spent an afternoon with him at Oxford. It was the King's birthday, and as one of the Royal Household Bridges had received a formal command to attend at Windsor. It was also the day of the Encaenia, and among others the German Ambassador was receiving an honorary degree from the University. A. D. Godley ran into us in the High, and expressed mock astonishment that Bridges was absenting himself from the Sheldonian and the lunch to the distinguished guests afterwards. 'You *ought* to go!' urged Godley. 'Then, when Germany invades us, he might persuade the Army to spare your house on Boar's Hill. "Lift not thy spear against the Muses' bower!"' he chuckled. 'I shall sh-shoot him if he comes anywhere near me,' answered Bridges. The Sarajevo assassination had not yet happened, and few took the possibility of war seriously.

That same day Bridges read me *Noel*, and this reminds me again of Godley. 'What am I to do?' he asked once. 'Bridges has written me a note that he wants to see me. I know what will happen. He will read me a new poem and I shall say the wrong thing. And Bridges will say, "Godley, do you know I think you are the stupidest man I ever met?"'

It is so easy to say the wrong thing when a poet first reads you his latest poem; it is so much better to read it through the eyes. When Bridges read me *Noel* and asked, 'Well, what do you think of it?' I said the wrong thing, that I felt its amazingly clear frosty atmosphere and the way it conveyed the note of bells through cold waiting silence:

¹ *Collected Essays*, XV.

The constellated sounds
 ran sprinkling on earth's floor
 As the dark vault above
 with stars was spangled o'er.

There was a long grimness of unspeaking sorrow and disappointment. Then Bridges said, mildly but severely, 'Do you know every one *else* to whom I have read the poem has found in it an absolutely *new* music?'

And of course every one else was right. Yet I think he found his own poem too much of a mystery. He writes wonderingly, that of all who so admired it 'not one of the readers knew how it scanned'. If this was so, it is the measure of the distance we have travelled since those incredibly distant days when (apparently) most readers of verse counted the syllables off on their fingers, and to have an honest woman made of her the Muse must have her liberties of elision marked ponderously in print, as 'vi'lets', 'whisp'ringly', and so on. What Bridges did in *Noel*, surely, was not at all what he thought he did—loosen Milton's final foot in a line—but merely to trust the cadences of his verse to ordinary speech-rhythms, perfectly marshalled and controlled by his mastery of his own thought and visualization. *Noel* is an astonishingly fresh and lovely poem, the first entirely successful unrhymed lyric in English (or, if Collins's *Ode to Evening* is that, then the second); it contains two rhymes only.

In the war which broke out in August 1914, both Bridges and Godley, who had jested together about the desirability of conciliating the German Ambassador, were in the renowned regiment of dons and other Oxford citizens who were past military age. Indeed, it was often referred to as 'Godley's Own', since there was some uncertainty as to what its initials, G.R., meant. They stood for 'Georgius Rex',¹ but were by some believed to stand for 'God's Rejected'.

This gallant force has receded into time's shadows. But legends have gathered about its memory, and some of these will be remembered a century hence. Here is a story which I know must be true, since I heard it from Gilbert Murray. He was drilling with Bridges and others, in what is now Raleigh Park, Hinksey, when a bird flew over. A voice from the ranks of God's Rejected observed, 'I b-b'lieve *that*—was a blackcock!' 'Silence in the ranks!' shouted the sergeant. 'All the same,' the voice persisted, 'I b-b'lieve it—*was* a blackcock!'²

¹ Hence these warriors were often styled 'Gorgeous Wrecks'.

² If it *was* a blackcock, its appearance certainly justified indiscipline. But perhaps what Bridges said was *blackcap*. Blackcaps are not uncommon on Boar's Hill, whereas of course there are no blackcocks within a hundred miles. Murray does not claim to be an ornithologist; I remember his surprise at birds that were new to him, when we were walking in 'Jarn' and I pointed out a pair of goldcrests which had just alighted on a broom bush in front of us. Bridges knew birds well.

Tradition asserts that Bridges was always out of step. His tall figure made this conspicuous, and after a while he was persuaded that he might serve his country better than in quasi-military fashion.

Bridges's chief war contribution was his anthology, *The Spirit of Man*. Not all of its contents are first-rate; it contains a good deal that is not by any means good poetry. Bridges of course knew this, and it does not matter in the least, for the compiler's knit integrity imposes its own unity and quality, a mood which finds for even poor verse a place where it is effective. There was originality, as well as tact and insight, in using brief French poems, short enough for even his countrymen to understand or at any rate guess at their meaning: also prose passages which by reason of emotion or philosophy rose to poetry—of this the book contains many examples, the Last Testimony of Naylor the Quaker, the last evening together of St. Augustine and St. Monica before the latter's death, the wonderful scenes of reverie from Tolstoi. Bridges had the knack of making even a tiny detached scrap, perhaps a couple of lines, significant. This book was a tremendous and immediate success and has taken permanent place as one of the two or three anthologies which are themselves works of art.

Some surprise was expressed at the time, and often since, that a book entitled *The Spirit of Man* contained nothing by either Dante or Browning; I have heard it suggested that Dante and Browning were omitted because they were not Etonians. This does not explain Dante's omission, however, for Bridges set the highest value on his work. As to Browning, in the present Master of Balliol's presence the question was raised by Philip Wicksteed, 'who began to rag Bridges. "I don't believe you've a copy of Tennyson in the house, Bridges!" "Oh, yes, I have" (but Bridges could not find one). "And I don't believe you've ever had a Browning. And why is there nothing from Browning in *The Spirit of Man*?" "I did try to find something in Browning I could use," answered Bridges. "They told me he had something about a thrush that was rather good. I thought I'd like to read it, so I hunted it out. But it was all *rot*! all about 'the wise thrush that sings—each thing—twice over! lest you should think he never could recapture—that first fine careless rapture!' What did the fellow mean by calling it 'careless'? Why, the song is most—carefully rehearsed—and known from end to end! I really couldn't use—such utter rubbish—as that! If the song were 'careless', how could you—'recapture' it? So I saw that Browning was no good.'"

Bridges had kept Gerard Hopkins's MSS. by him, and at the end of the nineteenth century in Alfred Miles's *Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth*

Century had tried to interest people in his friend's verse, by a cautious selection which included a passage from 'A Vision of Mermaids', 'The Habit of Perfection', 'The Starlight Night', 'Inversnaid', 'The Candle Indoors', but not 'The Windhover', 'Epithalamion', or the great and terrible religious sonnets (though comments in Bridges's introduction show that he realized their power and originality). In 1918 he judged that the time was ripe for a serious effort to find Hopkins his right place, and he published *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*.

I think it is now generally admitted that in his anxiety to conciliate readers brought up on established verse-forms Bridges was a little too cautious in praise and slightly overstressed what he explicitly admits were only minor features of Hopkins's work, its 'oddity', exaggerated Marianism, and other peculiarities.

But those faults are present, and the resentment of later critics has been unreasonable. All of us know completely conventional persons who are sure that if they had been on the Via Dolorosa on the original Good Friday *they* would at once have recognized what following ages were to learn through the witness of the army of martyrs and by infinitely slow stages. But why need intelligent readers assume that what to us, in the case of Gerard Hopkins, after a quarter of a century of constant discussion is now obvious ought to have been obvious when discussion was just beginning?

Mr. Herbert Read, for example, whose essay on Hopkins seems to me excellent and searching, in his annoyance at Bridges's temperance of praise finds fuel for anger in nearly every sentence. 'But friendship is perhaps never solidly grounded on intellectual interests; Hopkins had known Bridges for ten years before he discovered (and then from a review!) that his friend wrote poetry.'¹

This fact appears to Bridges's credit rather than to Hopkins's. It proves that all the blindness was not on one side. Hopkins must have been deeply self-absorbed if he could go on for years sending Bridges his own poems and discussing poetry with him, without discovering that the latter himself wrote poetry and, indeed, lived for it as hardly any poet since Milton. This is one of the strangest things I know, a revelation of Bridges's quite outstanding lack of obsession with his own verse.

And was the destruction of Bridges's letters to Hopkins necessarily due, as Mr. Read asserts, to 'conceit'? Has there ever lived a good poet who would not be glad if he could destroy his own letters, at any rate those written in his younger days? What have other people to do with our personal affairs—unless they come on them by accident, which is some-

¹ *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism*, p. 352.

thing that cannot be helped? Bridges wanted posterity to have his poetry, and (as his deeply personal essays on Dolben and Dixon show) had no objection to the preservation of incidents which discovered something of a poet's likeness when he lived. But he was not pompous enough, and he was far too devoted to poetry, to want whatever fame was ultimately his to be cluttered up with correspondence, much of it inevitably ephemeral, so that the temple he had raised with care was flanked by a rubble pile. Unlike Hopkins, he lived to fulfil his promise, and his mind went satisfyingly and fully into his work. Is it only 'conceit' that is at pains to leave nothing except the carefully written verse into which a man has put his best? Few effective professional writers have been good letter-writers, and Bridges's letters were not usually very interesting ones, they were mostly practical. He could easily have printed excerpts from his letters to Hopkins, which would have showed him up as wise and all that was good, but—regarding his letters as his own concern—he saw them as like his suppressed imperfect early poems, and he did not choose to cumber his best writing with superfluous and largely irrelevant matter.

Hopkins's case was different; his life was one of frustration and wretched incompleteness. We preserve a friend's letters because their incidental flaws in no way bother us but are understood and accepted, and when that friend is dead there is abundant reason to hesitate before destroying them. During years in which he felt inhibited from writing verse at all, Hopkins's letters were his outlet (for the mould and content of his sermons were laid down for him in advance and little of the real man found expression in them).

Bridges guarded his friend's poems through many years, aware that no other contemporary (except Dixon, whose own poems had no vogue and who was without any influence) could, or would, see their merit. The critics who are out of temper with Bridges are generally kind to Patmore, who saw merely confusion in Hopkins's verse, whereas Bridges saw freshness, originality, and imagination. His *Notes* are nothing like as ungenerous as they seem to our own full and justified enthusiasm, and his prefatory sonnet (printed before the recognition of Hopkins had even begun) proves that he made no mistake about the latter's quality, as compared with 'the chaffinch flock' of poets who caught men's eyes. The turn of the century, when Bridges published his first selection, was probably the earliest date when Hopkins's *Poems* could have won any hearing, and Bridges always planned an ultimate fuller hearing. Even after that fuller publication, the critics' reception was frigid and it took eight years to sell out a first edition of 700 copies. If it had not been for Bridges, no one would ever have heard Hopkins's name and his verse

would have stayed unknown for ever. The two friends wrote to each other on all subjects, religion as well as poetry, with complete frankness. Long before Hopkins died each was aware of the other's unusual quality, and Hopkins, could he have foreseen the manner in which Bridges's affectionate watching over his work and chances of ultimate fame would be misunderstood, would have been astounded.

During and immediately after the First World War Bridges wrote several poems of occasion. 'Hell and Hate' and 'The Chivalry of the Seas', and two moving epitaphs—on the 'British Graves in France', and those of the Worcesters at Gheluvelt—are beautiful. 'Der Tag' (on the German Fleet's surrender) is spirited. Some of its companion poems, however, are among the few really weak pieces he ever published. He collected all these, together with other poems, including some which were experimental in metre, in *October and Other Poems*, 1920.

This little book won attention by two qualities besides its metrical newness. The reader may remember my ill luck in praising the clearness of atmosphere and the frosty night effects which I found in *Noel*. Though the poet was right to rebuke me for this, yet I think I was not mistaken. Bridges once remarked to me, of E. M. Forster, that of all men living he had the most brilliantly photographic mind. Let me explain. As I now sit typing, I am vaguely conscious of the jumping letters, of the keyboard, of the words being formed on the white sheet of paper, of the rainswept outside world, of light falling over my shoulder. But to-morrow all this will be the dimmest of blurs in memory. This would not be so, I believe (and so Bridges thought), if I were Mr. Forster; the details would stand out still clearly, I should be able to set them down vividly, in outlines which would startle my reader into attention. When Bridges pointed this out, I remembered incidents, vignettes in *A Passage to India*, pictures of things I had never seen consciously, though I spent far longer in India than Forster did—things which at once I recognized when the novelist introduced them, so that I had to exclaim, 'Yes, that's true! I have seen it, though I did not *know* I had seen it!' For example, there is a hot-weather squirrel, hung head-downwards, 'pressing its belly against burning scaffolding', its sun-emaciated body seeming to be almost glued where it clings. That *is* just how a squirrel looks at that time and place, but it was Forster who made me realize how often I had seen it.

Bridges's own memory was unsurpassed for its beautifully ordered possession of clearly outlined details seen long ago. From now on, this begins to take increasing prominence in his verse; it had already given an almost uniquely personal quality to his memoirs of Dolben and Dixon, than which no more living pictures of men who have passed away exist in

literature. And I do not believe that any poet ever remembered his youth as perfectly as Bridges did. How much detail returns in the amused recollection of 'Flycatchers'. Even when its presence may seem hidden, memory comes from those far-off days; it was not at any of our hamlets under Boar's Hill ridge, but in Kent, in his far-away childhood that Bridges had watched

our country folk
Who are ringing for Christ
in the belfries to-night
With arms lifted to clutch
the rattling ropes that race
Into the dark above
and the mad romping din.

The second new quality is an ineffable peace, which now falls upon all that he writes: such a steadfast prolonged sunset brightness over green meadows, as we find nowhere else, except in the final chorus of *Samson Agonistes* and in Prospero's last speeches. This peace often attains astonishing concentration of expression, as in the last stanza of that very beautiful poem, 'October':

But this late day of golden fall
is still as a picture upon a wall
or a poem in a book lying open unread.
Or whatever else is shrined
when the Virgin hath vanishèd;
Footsteps of eternal Mind
on the paths of the dead.

As he enters his life's concluding decade, we can see the old poet, alone amid companions, thinking back more and more, 'hearkening in the aspect of the Eternal Silence'.

XI

POST-WAR YEARS

OXFORD delighted in him. There never was a company in which Bridges would not have looked distinguished; eyes followed with admiration his well-known striding figure, crowned with the broad-brimmed hat which he never troubled to remove when he entered your house. Everything about him was healthy; he was perfect in physique, his presence was magnificent. 'I saw him only once', Mr. Percy Simpson, the authority on Ben Jonson (and on how much else), told me. 'I was waiting to see Cannan, at the Clarendon Press, when Bridges called. Cannan introduced me, and Bridges said, "You know, Mr. Simpson, I don't care much for Ben Jonson". But he said it in the friendliest manner and—quite unlike what I heard of his manner—he discussed him gently and courteously. But I did not care *what* he said! As he sat there, with his arms folded behind his head and his legs flung over the arms of his chair—it was before old age had set lines in his face—I simply could not take my eyes off him. I thought him—and have thought him ever since—the possessor of the most *beautiful* face I have ever seen on a man!'

The same testimony, in the same words, I have heard repeatedly. S. K. Ratcliffe, whom I took over to Chilswell in 1927, nearly twenty years later told me, 'He was the most *beautiful* old man I ever saw and he was dressed in the most perfect—and most perfectly fitting—suit of light summer tweed that I ever saw. I have forgotten everything else about the interview but I shall never forget this picture!'

An aristocracy of appearance and manner, revealed in all his gestures, sometimes seemed to awe even the impersonal forces which rule our life. Shortly after the First World War, Bridges one day visited Eton. He announced to his host and hostess that he was returning to Oxford on the 4.50 p.m. train. 'But there *is* no such train, Dr. Bridges!' 'I l-looked it up and saw it. And—I'm g-going by it.' No one could dissuade him; he went to the station. Here all the authorities assured him there was no such train. But Bridges had looked it up and knew better; he had his bag taken on to the platform for Oxford. And—at 4.50 p.m. precisely—a train came in: stopped: and took the Poet Laureate to Oxford. When he got home he found that he had looked up the a.m. trains by mistake, and the 4.50 train was a morning one. How, then, did he get that train to take him to Oxford? It was an express train. But Royalty suddenly

decided to visit Eton, and—at the very time when Bridges was insisting that he was ‘going by the 4.50’—orders were telegraphed to stop it for a minute or two. It was stopped accordingly, and Bridges stepped on to it, no one daring to question an apparition so august.

Of his frankness and incisiveness, qualities in which I never met his equal, many stories were told. He was the only man I ever met who seemed to say exactly what came into his mind the moment it came into his mind. His conversation was like that of Dr. Johnson thinking aloud—if one adds to that great man the gift of imagination and critical subtlety, as well as often essential justice. The effect was heightened by a slight stutter, not enough to impede what he said, but enough to give a sudden rushing as of wings to its emphatic conclusion. ‘I *detested* his philosophy: his religion I *despised*: and I didn’t think much of his poetry. *But*—he was a very nice fellow.’ This placed the poet in question and made everything satisfactorily clear. ‘Some people say he’s a Jew. But I say—he’s only a Welshman.’

No one ever minded in the least what Mr. Nowell Smith has styled ‘his childlike delight in his own powers and special advantages, his boyish love of brusque personal encounters’.¹ On the contrary, incidents when he had clubbed some unwary friend were gleefully told over Oxford, and nearly always by the victim himself first. I never met any one to whom his frankness was not a cause of added zest in his company.

He himself was roughly treated in 1920, when he was responsible for a letter which he got signed by as many prominent members of the academic world as possible, and sent to the heads of German universities, expressing a wish that intellectual co-operation might be resumed. *The Times* handled him with extraordinary severity, in repeated magisterial castigations which now make very amusing reading.

Bridges’s sense of decency made him willing to try to help forward better relations with a people whose responsibility for the drawn-out tragedy of the War he felt deeply. But those who jumped to the belief that he had gone wickedly radical and pacifist were mistaken. In the General Strike, 1926, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a far from revolutionary appeal for the restoration of peaceful discussion. Yet, as the *Letters of George Gordon* (published 1943) have reminded us, even this temperate expression of desire struck Oxford (and other places) as an outrage. I was asked to get signatures to the manifesto and, aware that on Boar’s Hill I was *in partibus infidelium*, set out doggedly to tour my very sticky parish. Its two stickiest inhabitants proved to be two celebrated poets. ‘No’, was all that Bridges would say (and he said it often).

¹ *The Times*, 23 April 1930.

'The old ship's—going down! And I'm—going down—with it!' 'Ah!' said G. N. Clark¹ of Oriel when I told of my experiences. 'He's thinking of the fellows on the quarterdeck! Not the poor devils down in the engine-room!'

As true conservatism should, Bridges's conservatism ranged over the past as well as the present. He met Gilbert Murray shortly after a book had been published which pleased and impressed him. 'You ought to read it, Murray! It's a grand book. It says—just what *I've* always said about the French Revolution.' 'What is that?' 'Why, that it was all—damned nonsense.' 'In what way damned nonsense?' 'Why, all a put-up job! You read the book and you'll see!' Which perhaps did not mean much more than that Bridges regarded the French Revolution as, quite definitely, a bad thing.

In 1924 I became his neighbour, and presently a very near neighbour. Bridges would appear in my study, which was outside the house; drop into a low chair, talk for a few minutes, and then go. His absorbing interest was words, their origin and shades of meaning. He possessed of course all of Murray's lordly *Oxford English Dictionary*, but not the handy one-volume edition, which was all I had. This he would borrow therefore, to find the commonest and most current usage of some word. 'You were out when I called yesterday,' he told me once. 'When did you call?' He stated the time. 'I was in,' I said. 'No, you weren't. I came into your study and you were out. And' (his voice rose reprovingly) 'you've been messing your books about again! Your *Dictionary* wasn't in the right place and I had to hunt for it. See that it is kept where it should be!'

Sometimes I had a book which he wanted to read—perhaps a book which he suspected I did not intend him to read. He would appear in our drawing-room, which had a long low window: demand the book, and, throwing himself down in a chair which had runners, propel himself swiftly up to the window, and sit there, hat shading his eyes and feet flung up to the sill, reading until he finished, when he would wander out again. He read in this fashion my *Other Side of the Medal*, a book which I suppressed from his notice as unlikely to give him much joy. But he heard of it somehow or other and insisted on my digging it out.

The value of his service to our tongue, in his S.P.E. tracts, has never been adequately recognized. Yet this interest sometimes gave rise to individuality which found trifling expression. A story is told of his being asked by a group of reformers to lunch with them, and to address them afterwards. Bridges told them that he had come to an important decision.

¹ Now Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge.

They had no doubt often wondered whether *neither* should be pronounced *neether* or *nyther*. After long thought he had come to announce that the word should be rejected altogether, for a new brief form, *nith*.

One day he met Gilbert Murray and H. A. L. Fisher in the Broad, outside Blackwell's. They chatted a while, and Bridges asked Fisher what he thought of a certain Victorian poet.¹ 'I don't much care for him', Fisher replied. 'He uses such low mean words—words like *cab* and *tram*.' Bridges considered this carefully. '*Cab*?' he remarked at last. 'A *bad* word! But *tram*? A *beautiful* word!'

His attempts to mend our spelling are well known and led to much prejudice and misrepresentation. Most of us agree that reform is very desirable, but it is far from easy; Bridges's own practice varied and abounds in inconsistencies. He also, with (I think) less justification, tried to improve the alphabet and added new letters. They are attractive in themselves and easy to read. But the trouble of having to write in this script is considerable, and the fact that his prose is now printed in it is partly responsible for the little knowledge there is of his powers and insight as a critic.

He had long come in for much ill-informed criticism of his metrical experiments and views on rhythm. Not all the critics had read him attentively. About 1908 a Cambridge professor for some reason thought it necessary to write several books on prosody. He discovered *two* students of this subject, Bridges and Brydges, and dealt with them both frankly. Bridges he reprobated: 'as usual, he is quite on the wrong tack'; but Brydges he considered admirable and far-sighted. As illustrative quotations proved, both were one and the same person. 'It looks as if he knew me only by hearsay,' Bridges wrote to me.

'He was not, I think,' writes Oliver Elton, 'a man to argue with.' Perhaps not. But you got on famously if you ventured curtly to disagree with him, he took this generously. Once, on my way across the fields to my lecture in Oxford, having time to spare I called for a few minutes of conversation. He was in one of his extremely infrequent moods of depression, and begged me to stay. I stayed (and my class later forgave me), and we talked all morning. Yet all I remember is three trivial matters. As he sat there disconsolately, sometimes reaching forward to throw another log on the fire (his fires were always wood fires), he began to praise, as I thought excessively, a lyric by a living writer. I made no comment, and he suddenly flashed at me, 'It's better than Andrew Marvell, anyway!' (he knew my delight in Marvell). I neither agreed nor disagreed, but continued our general conversation, across which from

¹ Murray cannot recall who this poet was.

time to time the same challenge was flung, 'It's better than Marvell!' Finally Bridges paused, looked at me hard, and asked, 'Don't you think so?' 'No, I do *not*.' Immediately the talk passed into smooth water, and the whole morning remains in memory as a sunny experience.

The second of the three things I remember was merely personal. In 1915 I had sent him a book of mine which he never acknowledged. Now, ten years later, he growled irrelevantly, 'I didn't like that book you sent me!' I had known this all along, of course; and, though he did not name the book, understood perfectly that he was plucking out this tiny thorn of memory which had been vexing him. We laughed simultaneously, and that was that. We made no further reference to it.

The third matter was the prose work which Coventry Patmore considered his greatest work, destroyed because Hopkins told him, 'That's telling secrets!' Bridges too read it in manuscript and discussed it with Hopkins. They both thought it worthless and in bad taste, as Rabindranath Tagore considered Bengali Vaishnava erotic mystical verse.¹ 'Hopkins did not want to hurt Patmore's feelings, so all he said was, "That's telling secrets!"'

Bridges never bothered to learn to play bridge but he liked a game of whist; I was sometimes asked to make a fourth. I am no great hand at card games but he was transparent guilelessness. Once, judging correctly from the extreme reluctance with which, after prolonged pauses and careful repeated scrutiny of his opponents' faces, he put down his jack, that he held also the king, I took his card with my queen and later collected his king with my ace (which I also held). Bridges, who had had other intentions for his king, thought my action inconvenient and was extraordinarily upset, accusing me of having revoked. 'You ought to have played that ace earlier, when you played a wrong suit!' No one supported him and there was no question that he was mistaken; he had been deeply absorbed in his own elaborate (and very obvious) scheming. But he refused to be comforted or convinced, and for a long time he fixed all events by the date of my crime—which became the most celebrated revocation since that of Nantes. 'When was it that Philip Wicksteed was here, Rob?' 'I don't know. But I know it was the day after Thompson revoked.' 'When was it that the French Ambassador was given a degree at Oxford?' 'I can't remember the actual date. But I know that it was exactly a fortnight before Thompson revoked.'

On occasion he could show what C. M. Doughty would have called an 'elvish' sense of humour. I suppose I must have been talking about the wild flowers of Palestine, and had said something about hollyhocks, which

¹ 'Some of those poems', said Tagore to me, 'are *untouchable*!' Bridges spoke quite as strongly of Patmore's book.

had fallen in with Bridges's constant interest in words, so that he had checked it up. 'Do you know what the meaning of "hollyhocks" is, 'Thompson?' he asked me, a few days later, with a modesty of tone, as of one seeking information where he was sure he could get it. This ought to have put me on my guard, but did not. 'Why, yes,' I said, under the impression that I did know. 'It was one of the flowers which the Crusaders brought from the Holy Land, and they called it hollyhock, holy *hocus* or cup.' Bridges rose, and with a slow deliberateness which indicated coming triumph went over to his complete Murray's *Dictionary*, took out the 'H' volume and read, 'The guess that the hollyhock was doubtless so called from being brought from the Holy Land has been given in ignorance'. This incident gave him a deal of pleasure.

'The Muses', says Saintsbury, 'are feminine and demand a man's whole time.' Bridges had dedicated his life to them and rested in the certainty that only by concentrating on poetry and the kindred study of language, and by regard to only the finest work that had been done in verse, could a man produce his best. 'I told Blunden', he used to say, 'that if he went on reading Clare it would finish his own poetry.' 'I warned Squire when he started *The London Mercury* that if he went in for editing he'd write no more poetry.'

Life he regarded as far too precious to waste in being bored, by men or by books. One day I found on his table a verse play which the author, a distinguished poet of my own generation, had just sent him. I showed some interest, and when I left I borrowed it. I was well on my way to the gate when the door opened, and Bridges, anxiety in every feature, called after me. 'I shouldn't read *much* of that if I were you, or you'll become—a most *frightful* bore!'

Once an earnest but not exhilarating admirer of his work persuaded one of Bridges's friends to take him to Chilswell. Admirer and poet were left together for better acquaintance, while the friend talked to Mrs. Bridges. Only a very few minutes had passed when there came a shout of appeal. 'Here! call off your friend! call off your friend!' 'I suppose', Bridges said to me, the first time we met, 'you feel you have *got* to talk to me about poetry!' I remembered the hint, and we used to discuss a thousand matters, but poetry rarely. 'Rob always likes to see you', was my reward, in Mrs. Bridges's report, 'because you never stay long.' I apologize for setting this down—but not so many distinctions have come my way that I can afford to lose this one.

'They tell me', he remarked in 1927, of *An Indian Day*, 'that you have written a novel. Do you mean to say—that you've gone on, day after day—writing down *words*—till you've made a big book—a novel?'

Another time, in the same year, when he burst into my study he happened to find me less cheerful than usual. 'You discouraged?' he asked. 'Ycs, rather.' 'Well, I'm not! and I'll tell you something! I am now an old man, and never in all my life was there a time when so many good books were being published as now.' This, I think, was at that time true. By good books Bridges did not mean fiction, which he read rarely. He meant science, history, criticism. He took intense delight, I remember, in the work of the naturalist Beebe. Another book which greatly pleased him was Mr. Harold Nicolson's *Some People*.

Mr. Horatio Bottomley chose to think that the Poet Laureate was scamping his duty and was not writing enough verse for national occasions; he asked extremely silly questions from time to time in the House of Commons. Once, when Bridges did write a political poem (not one of his best), Bottomley in the pages of *John Bull* professed deep satisfaction and proceeded with gusto to quote it. 'Hold your chair's arms tight, reader, and get ready!' The same stupidity reappeared across the Atlantic, when in 1924 Bridges and Mrs. Bridges accepted an invitation to spend three months at Ann Arbor, as guests of the University of Michigan. From the University they received only that immense courtesy and friendliness which America shows so spontaneously. But a reporter who failed to get Bridges to chatter put his resentment into the headline, 'King's canary refuses to chirp'. I have met people in England who thought that witty.

Nothing of this ever ruffled Bridges. Mrs. Bridges, however, once out of curiosity asked me if I had seen one of the articles which set out to bait him. As it happened, I had. 'What did it say?' 'Well, it said, among other things, that his favourite expression is "I don't care a damn!"' 'And that's true', she said. Bridges did not care a damn now, and presently his critic was found other employment, which removed him from those public activities by which he had served his country so conspicuously and so long.

The grotesqueness of imagining that Bridges should, or could, be tied to the *corvée* of writing ceremonial verses amused his friends, and for the sake of hearing his explosive comments they sometimes cautiously pretended to suggest it. The late Professor Margoliouth found him one day in Blackwell's bookshop and in his grimly serious manner expressed surprise that he could squander his time thus. 'You must just now be *very* busy!' 'Why?' asked Bridges in surprise. 'Writing your ode for the Duchess's new baby.' Bridges was too astonished to be altogether articulate—but his feelings were quite clear.

In 1925 he published *New Verse*, written in 1921.

He was always careful to explain that the stress was on *New*. It was justified. There are two or three poor pieces, their failure due to the combination which was fatal to him, when some political occasion was expressed in verse with 'the boyish and old-fashioned humour that was characteristic of him',¹ as in 'To His Excellency':

One of all our brave commanders,
Near of kin and dear my friend,
Led his men in France and Flanders
From the first brush to the end. . . .

Hit by howitzers and snipers
He in his five years campaign
Rode the land from Reims to Wipers,
On the Marne and on the Aisne.

In every poet, and usually in every volume of every poet, space has to be reserved somewhere for a contribution by his own bad *daemon*, whose assistance is later to be 'evidence for the opposition' when the devil's advocate comes up at the time of final assessment. Bridges's own unfriendly spirit is at any rate allowed about as little space as that of any poet; in *New Verse* his style is cramped very tightly.

For *New Verse* is one of Bridges's most brilliant books, of astonishing freshness and variety; certainly no other English poet when verging on his eightieth year ever produced anything like it. On its least imaginative level, as in 'Poor Poll', it is a wonderful picture of the alert old poet and his amused unselfconscious interest in the world he had watched so long:

I saw it all, Polly, how when you had call'd for sop
and your good friend the cook came & fill'd up your pan
you yerk'd it out deftly by beakfuls scattering it
away far as you might upon the sunny lawn
then summon'd with loud cry the little garden birds
to take their feast. Quickly came they flustering around
Ruddock & Merle & Finch squabbling among themselves
nor gave you thanks nor heed while you sat silently
watching, and I beside you in perplexity
lost in the maze of all mystery and all knowledge
felt how deep lieth the fount of man's benevolence
if a bird can share it & take pleasure in it.

The book's sunny serenity is very lovely and is everywhere. It shines through its recapturing of early memories, now clearer and brighter than ever. Our language contains no more detailed and vivid landscape and

¹ *The Times*, 22 April 1930.

picture than 'Kate's Mother', a tender and affectionate tribute; the reader takes every step of the boy's unforgotten journey of so long ago. And how can one adequately praise 'The Tramps'? The mystery of sounds heard in night's stillness in childhood returns as we lie beside the boy listening to those echoing steps in the midsummer dusk under his window:

Into the maze of my delight
Those blind intruders walk;
And ever I wonder who they be
And of what things they talk.

'The Sleeping Mansion'—the lines filed down to extreme spareness, the whole etching perfect—and 'The Great Elm' are bright with the same unparalleled clarity, now deepened in beauty by an ever-present sense of the majesty and mystery in our trivial human affairs. Bridges's own 'dweller in the innermost' begins to reveal himself to the conscious mind that has been his companion:

He is of such immortal kind,
His inwit is so clean,
So conscient with the eternal Mind—
The self of things unseen,
That when within his world I win,
Nor suffer mortal change,
I am of such immortal kin
No dream is half so strange . . .
As there in lavish self-delight,
Godlike and single-souled,
I lay until the dusk of night
Came creeping o'er the wold.

These poems are 'all in recognizable old styles' and recapture all his old mastery and even enrich it. I propose to quote the whole of 'Low Barometer', which seems to me one of the three or four greatest poems he ever wrote. Why it is so entirely unknown is something I cannot explain, except that after a poet is at last established people seem to cease to read his later work and to take it for granted. In imaginative terror-striking power this is unlike anything that he ever wrote.

The south-wind strengthens to a gale,
Across the moon the clouds fly fast,
The house is smitten as with a flail,
The chimney shudders to the blast.

On such a night, when Air has loosed
 Its guardian grasp on blood and brain,
 Old terrors then of god or ghost
 Creep from their caves to life again;

And Reason kens he herits in
 A haunted house. Tenants unknown
 Assert their squalid lease of sin
 With earlier title than his own.

Unbodied presences, the pack'd
 Pollution and remorse of Time,
 Slipp'd from oblivion reënact
 The horrors of unhouseld crime.

Some men would quell the thing with prayer
 Whose sightless footsteps pad the floor,
 Whose fearful trespass mounts the stair
 Or bursts the lock'd forbidden door.

Some have seen corpses long interr'd
 Escape from hallowing control,
 Pale charnel forms—nay ev'n have heard
 The shrilling of a troubled soul,

That wanders till the dawn hath cross'd
 The dolorous dark, or Earth hath wound
 Closer her storm-spredd cloke, and thrust
 The baleful phantoms underground.

But I must return to the newness of these metres, which was what the poet himself thought important. His search for them has been justified; free at last from the cramping pedantries, taken at second hand from another, of his classical measures, he has found his way to his own individual final freedom of movement.

The book opens with an exquisitely tenuous rhymeless lyric, 'Cheddar Pinks'. In other pieces, the metre he is to use fully in *The Testament of Beauty* reaches repeatedly, and keeps effortlessly, for many lines a sweep and grandeur which even the finest passages of the later poem do not excel. In 'Come Si Quando' are a profundity and cosmic imaginative power which his work had not previously attained. This steadfast fullness of light does not shine in a young man's mind, and an old man's mind—though it may hold the wisdom out of which it arises and on which it rests—is usually too worn to find place for it. The poem goes back very far, recovering the naked sublimity of the noblest Anglo-Saxon poetry, as of men aware that they move in a world of spreading waters and un-

fathomable skies, with tempest everywhere in reserve; its freshness of expression is such as must amaze—‘the boundless nomadry of the stars by night’ and ‘the high mountains Climbing in spacious ranks upon the stark-black void’. Read the whole of that passage—beginning with such an opening as Cynewulf might have found—where Bridges thrusts aside our whole elaborate intricate world of countless detail:

It happ’d to me sleeping in the Autumn night, what time
Sirius was uplifting his great lamp o’er the hills.

‘Come Si Quando’? Mrs. Bridges, reading over the poem in draft remarked that there were too many *come se quando*’s. Bridges thought, this might serve as a title. But he substituted the Latin *si* for the Italian *se* and it so appeared in print. When he discovered the slip, he decided to let it remain, perhaps remembering that Milton’s *Il Penseroso* is said to be grammatically incorrect.

Finally, for sheer flawless beauty, consider ‘The Psalm’:

A great Huguenot psalm it trod forth on the air
with full slow notes moving as a goddess stepping
through the responsive figures of a stately dance
conscious of beauty and of her fair-flowing array
in the severe perfection of an habitual grace—

another of those lines in which Bridges unites imaginative vision with the perception of aesthetic judgement. This Huguenot psalm had once defied ‘in some lone valley of the Cevennes’ men

hunting their fancied prey afar in the dark night
and with its ghostly music mock’d their oaths and knives.
O evermore great Psalm spring forth! spring forth anew!

XII

THE TESTAMENT OF BEAUTY

It was, I think, early in 1926 that he began work on what he knew would conclude his achievement, *The Testament of Beauty*. Like Milton, beginning late he pondered long, putting his materials together. The poem was to pick up comprehensively his lifelong interest in all branches of natural science and scientific speculation. But it dealt with far more than the phenomenal world; Bridges dismissed as outside its scope nothing whatever that concerned mankind. Its original title was *De Hominum Natura*, a reference to the title of Lucretius' great poem.

Bridges chose always to think well of his friends' abilities and knowledge; he would call on them or invite them to his house, to discuss some problem or subject on which he believed they had authority to speak. He talked to T. E. Lawrence; Sir Leonard Woolley's personal story of his discoveries in the Queen's tomb at Ur is commemorated in a superb passage; Kenneth Sisam was consulted often, so were others. He liked to get his details right. As the draft of the poem, complicated and with new themes constantly written in, became hard to follow Bridges asked the Oxford Press to set up a copy from it and to let him use it as the text, correcting in proof. The Press set up twenty copies, so that he might send them to the friends he was consulting. This is the now-famous privately printed first text. It shows rather more strongly than the final text the influence of some of the books he was closely reading for his poem, but the more obtrusive effects were planed away as he worked on it.

I had the advantage of being less than five minutes' walk from the poet. I suppose I must have been of some service; I am proud of my copy of the first text, with an inscription too kind for me to quote it, and I have come on a note which I did not know I possessed, dated 1 November (probably in 1927), which says 'I am sure you are right about the end of my 2nd Book. Your namesake my son said much the same of it as you do.'

But the little in the way of detail that I remember amounts to exceedingly little: the main help which Bridges got from his friends was about all that friends can ever give a poet, which is a close and sympathetic hearing while he opens his own mind. Facts, especially about lands or subjects of which he had little firsthand knowledge, he asked to be given;

and then he would read what he had written or talk about what he had accepted.

Once he asked me for a list of places I had seen, or knew by hearsay, which had lovely names and possessed great natural beauty. I ran up a list which included Kashmir, Carmel, and Pasadena famous for its rose-gardens. The reader who is interested in so trifling a detail can look up the passage which enshrines these names, in *The Testament of Beauty*.¹

Another time he asked me 'to write me four or five lines in the same metre, for my poem', on a subject which he named. I gave him two alternative passages, neither of them in the least pleasing me; but he was generous enough to say that he liked them both and would use them both, and I was invited round to a meeting where, with Mrs. Bridges's help, we worked out some sort of syncretism. It entailed the use of a map of India, which Bridges held on his knees. He very early decided what he wanted—I thought, inaccurately, and Mrs. Bridges supported me. 'Rob, what Mr. Thompson is saying is very interesting. He is pointing out——,' 'I've got what I was wanting,' 'But, Rob——,' 'I've got it.' And so it proved, and he insisted on using a bad spelling of a proper name. The upshot was of course an entirely different passage, in which my own wretched contributions were drowned out of sight. However, there is one line in *The Testament of Beauty* which survives as I wrote it. It is in no way worthy of remark and I am not going to indicate it.

He appeared one morning, radiant with satisfaction. 'I've just settled Sex', he told me. 'I've explained the whole problem.' I think this must have been in the latter part of Book II.

Another visit I remember with shame. He found me, as not infrequently, both feet on my desk and a cup of strong coffee in my hand, lost in some question I was trying to work out. As he subsided into his usual chair, he said, 'I've had a bad day. I've written only eight lines!' I hardly heard him. But I caught his tone of extreme discouragement, and I know that my subconscious self earnestly wished to say something helpful. I am quite certain, however, that this remained an unfulfilled impulse: that I did not speak but merely looked at him sympathetically. Yet I heard—we both heard, so that this ranks high in the list of authentic auditory illusions—a voice charged with all the comforting syrups in the world, which said, 'Ah! but then they are very *long* lines, aren't they?' Bridges had not studied his work in this aspect, and for a moment he looked as shocked and appalled as I did. Then he threw back his lionlike head, and laughed as I had never heard him laugh.

When I received my copy of Book I, I wrote at once to express my

¹ Book III, ll. 360 ff.

thanks. Next time I called at Chilswell, however, I felt unwelcome; and when I went, contrary to his custom Bridges did not accompany me to the gate. This custom, which greatly touched strangers, was friendliness, but also something more. On Boar's Hill we had far too many rabbits—our cats all lived on them and the rabbits lived on our gardens—and Bridges used to say that visitors were not careful to shut the gate to keep vermin out. Mrs. Bridges accompanied me instead, and observed, 'You know you are in disgrace!' 'Yes, I gathered that. But why?' 'You promised Rob to criticize his poem.' 'I really could not dream of doing any such thing!' Mrs. Bridges cut me short. 'You *promised* to criticize it and Rob expects it. And it's got to be *real* criticism, not just praise!' I set to work accordingly, to write a second and far longer letter which should combine the admiration I felt with searching criticism, so far as I could find cause for this; no literary composition ever gave me more trouble. The poet was pleased, nevertheless, and acknowledged it in one of his kindest and most generous letters. But thereafter, I was given no further chance to burke my engagements; he would call within twenty-four hours of sending me my copy, and it was 'Well! what do you think?'

I soon learnt that he was impatient at objections to a line or phrase—every poet will understand this and agree with him. But if you said, 'I should cut out the whole of that page' or 'I should drop those twenty lines', R. B. would be startled for a moment and then, more often than not, would reply, 'I think you are right.' Since I have seen it stated that Bridges was 'conceited', I want to say that I thought he was very much the reverse. He was opinionated—but willing to be contradicted and almost certain to listen closely to your reasons for disagreement. But he was almost touchingly modest. If he thought you worth talking to at all, he knew no way of talking to you except as an equal.

The final text was published in one volume in 1929 and was an immediate and tremendous success.

Already a considerable literature has grown up round *The Testament of Beauty*. Its superficial resemblance to *The Prelude* has been quick to take the eye; the two are perhaps the only great, or even considerable, philosophical poems in English, and (despite Lucretius) the last thing still left for poetry to do is to annex philosophy. *The Testament of Beauty*, like *The Prelude*, has won absorbed readers, both for the sake of what it says and for its personal revelation of the writer. But the differences are at least as fundamental as the likeness. Wordsworth traced the growth of a poet's mind and opinions. Bridges took little interest in his own mind

and opinions; he held the latter to be sound and, if occasion arose, expressed them, and then thought no more about them. In *The Testament of Beauty* he tried to set down the conclusions to which a long life full of leisure and contemplation had brought him, and while setting these down to come at universal truth and to set this down also. In its objectivity of purpose, its comprehensiveness of theme, its resolution to put down impersonal truth—so far as human limitations allowed, and thrusting aside the writer's own emotions except in so far as they might serve as occasional illustration—*The Testament of Beauty* is, as Professor Elton has observed,¹ 'at least in English, a new *species* of poem'.

Perhaps at first sight surprisingly, its closest kinship is with the two greatest works of Bridges's master John Milton: with *Paradise Lost*, which aimed deliberately, not at telling an exciting story or even to create a majestic image of fallen yet still rebellious courage and will, but to

assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men

and with *Samson Agonistes*, in which the same justification is shown in an individual life. The writer's own sorrows are remembered in tranquillity and with no remaining thought of self (except that personal experience is sometimes used to cast light on the all-important argument).

The poem was intended to express a philosophy, which philosophy is in its title. It is to set out what Beauty is and means: to link it up closely with whatever may be the world's ultimate cause.

Bridges tries to show the place of Beauty in our whole economy of thought: how it is to figure in our religion; by what steps the highest conceptions of it have grown up; and at what points in the course of 'emergent evolution' (the term occurs in the poem) the sense of beauty has been markedly quickened in mankind. He thinks of a driving force that presses for ever upward through the atom, through the organism, and then through all human experience, sensuous, aesthetic, rational, and spiritual. In this process beauty becomes, ever more and more consciously, *valued*, as well as perceived and expressed.²

But what *is* Beauty? This is a question to which Bridges addressed himself repeatedly:

I answer
the lover and poet in my loose alexandrines:
Beauty is the highest of all these occult influences,
the quality of appearances that thru' the sense
wakeneth spiritual emotion in the mind of man:

¹ Oliver Elton, *Robert Bridges and The Testament of Beauty*, p. 5.

² Ibid.

And Art, as it createth new forms of beauty
awakeneth new ideas that advance the spirit
in the life of Reason to the wisdom of God.

The Testament of Beauty, II. 840 ff.

Man's happiness, his flaunting honey'd flower of soul,
is his loving response to the wealth of Nature.
Beauty is the prime motiv of all his excellence,
his aim and peaceful purpose; whereby he himself
becoming a creator hath often a thought to ask
why Nature, being so inexhaustible of beauty,
should not be all-beauteous; why, from infinit resource,
produce more ugliness than human artistry
with any spiritual intention can allow?

Ibid., I. 120 ff.

For me, comfort possess'd me, the intimate comfort
of Beauty that is the soul's familiar angel
who bringeth me alway such joy as a man feeleth
returning to the accustom'd homeliness of home
after long absence or exile among strange things.

New Verse: 'Come Si Quando', ll. 37 ff.

our daily bread of pleasur;—enough that thus I deem
of Beauty among Goddes best gifts, and even above
the pleasur of Virtue accord it honour of men.

The Testament of Beauty, III. 322 ff.

Best is mature; tho' Beauty is neither growth nor strength;
for ugliness also groweth proudly and is strong.
Well might we ask what Beauty ever could liv or thrive
in our crowded democracy under governance
of such politic fancy as a farmer would show
who cultivated weeds in hope of good harvest:
and yet hath modern cultur enrich'd a wasting soil.

Ibid., I. 715 ff.

Beauty, the eternal Spouse of the Wisdom of God
and Angel of his Presence thru' all creation,
fashioning her new love-realm in the mind of man

Ibid., IV. 1 ff.

Verily by Beauty it is that we come at wisdom,
yet not by Reason at Beauty.

Ibid., IV. 1305 ff.

You can see how he returned to the theme again and again, never satisfied that he had expressed it aright or brought out all its truth.

Even in Bridges's earlier poems the same steadfast faith burns:

For beauty being the best of all we know
Sums up the unsearchable and secret aims
Of nature, and on joys whose earthly names
Were never told can form and sense bestow.¹

Beauty with him is twin-born with Joy; both are among 'the unsearchable and secret aims of nature'. The Hindu sages found joy, *ānanda*, as the purpose which shines and lives throughout creation: revealed in never-pausing drama, that ripples into the swiftly passing merriment of leaping waves or wind-ruffled leaves. For its steady constant glimmer, its eternal reality and abiding truth, even the sunlight sweeping through infinity of space is an inadequate symbol. 'Enter thou into the Joy of thy Lord' was the reward of the faithful steward of life when life was over: Joy in its supreme manifestation, tranquil and unshaken, Joy which is also Peace: as Augustine and Monica found it, in that ineffably moving conversation before the latter's death, which Bridges knew and loved so well.

Thus, to Bridges, Beauty was no mere superficial surface or perfect harmony of parts, crowned by their unity with new unimagined splendour and significance. Beauty was the very expression of God (for he never hesitated to use the term, and by it he meant a force which was personal, and personal in a sense which does not make it misleading to use of it human terms which indicate happiness, suffering, love. Especially love), existent and active throughout the Three Worlds and all they contain, urgent in man's development from the brute and urgent no less in the life of all living things. If God be thought of as trying unceasingly to enter the world He has made and inside which He has set human free will that can be hostile and to some extent even exclude Him, then Beauty is the main spearhead of this divine aggressive thrust from age to age. It is also God's means of self-expression in the creative act which has never paused but continues while new generations rise and vanish and the never-resting play of phenomena goes on. To Bridges, as to a poet with whom he had scant sympathy, the world meant 'intensely'—and it meant beauty.

All this, however, does not pass beyond assertion. It has to be linked up with a philosophy of method and process. Bridges takes Plato's vision of the two steeds, one ruly, the other unruly, and he rechristens them as Selfhood and Breed, both of them now good yokefellows under the skilled charioteer's guidance, neither of them to be repressed but both to be encouraged. Selfhood is individuality; Breed is the impulse of sex or creative impulse. In their progress through the field of existence they

¹ *The Growth of Love*, 8.

carry along with them much else which is not always thought of as accompanying them; Breed, for example, at quite a low or ordinary level of biological activity calls out maternal care and watchfulness.

That, put crudely—how crudely, some of its exquisite expressions, saying how much more than any prose exposition can say, will quickly show—is the central philosophic core of the poem. Yet I do not think that it is the philosophy, carefully thought out though it is, and often profoundly set forth, that will keep *The Testament of Beauty* alive. It is the abundance of incidental loveliness and sudden startling moments of wisdom, the numerous effective asides. 'The argument is difficult, the poem full of excursions and backwaters.'¹ What Mr. Nowell Smith says of Book I, 'Introduction', is true of the whole. 'It is hardly possible either to analyse this Introduction or to name one central idea informing it; but it does in an episodic way introduce us to the poet's attitude of mind and philosophic vocabulary.'²

Some of the things which Bridges believed he achieved in *The Testament of Beauty* seem to me still unachieved. He believed he had set English verse on a fair field of free new movement, and some of those who have written on his poem appear to accept this. But the metre—though in his hands again and again it is informed with rich intricate beauty and attains subtle inwoven harmonies—except when the poet's mind is eager and glowing falls readily into a kind of jogtrot, such as he was quick to note and condemn in the old conventional measures, especially the rhymed heroic couplet. The metre has escaped the dull gloss of those conventional measures but has encountered fresh perils. Its rules depend so completely on the poet's own sense of speech-rhythms that, if this sense momentarily flags, caprice seems to take a hand. For example, many lines which in the first privately printed text contain what under the old dispensation would have been another full iambic foot drop this foot in the final text entirely and yet remain technically unchanged in length. This, surely, means that sometimes too much is huddled into a line—or, contrariwise, that a line is left loose and the voice must therefore pad it.

And casualness, if not caprice, does sometimes come in, as when he says, of the lemmings, that they 'bravely forsook their crowded nestēs in the snow', or writes of 'the ravishing music that the small birdēs make'. In each of these instances it is true that, if *nestēs* and *birdēs* (in the first text he spells *birdies*, which he rightly saw was terrible—yet, however you spell the word, you can scarcely avoid this pronunciation) became *nests* and *birds*, the lines would be made into ordinary five-foot blank verse, a

¹ Elton, p. 5.

² Nowell Charles Smith, *Notes on The Testament of Beauty*, p. 14.

length which the poet sometimes uses deliberately in *The Testament of Beauty* (only, however, to end a paragraph or section). But by the normal spelling the lines would be lifted out of a triviality and indignity which was not in the poet's purpose and is therefore a flaw; and he could, alternatively, easily have found a way to give the lines their formal correct extension in a better manner than by using what is either an archaism borrowed from the period when our language abounded in frail light tenuous syllables just ready to fall, or is else the diction of nursery endearment. That he did not do either of these obvious things seems to me to show what the whole poem shows to a careful reading, that Bridges, who had done with English rhythms as much as any man who ever used them, now regarded himself as *emeritus* from all that. He was concerned with his message, and rhythm and verbal music or power were secondary, and not always that.

Yet, though he no longer troubled about perfection in detail, he attached immense importance to the metre, for a very moving and personal reason. A friend has revealed this; he reported to Bridges that another friend had been tremendously shaken by *The Testament of Beauty* and after expressing his admiration had concluded, 'It's the metre that does it'. 'He's quite right!' cried Bridges, and proceeded to explain why he thought this. The metre had established itself in his mind when he was in grief from the death of his daughter; he had gone out alone.

"Twas at thatt hour of beauty when the setting sun
squandereth his cloudy bed with rosy hues, to flood
his lov'd works as in turn he biddeth them Good-night;
and all the towers and temples and mansions of men
face him in bright farewell, ere they creep from their pomp
naked beneath the darkness;—while to mortal eyes
'tis given, ifso they close not of fatigue, nor strain
at lamplit tasks—'tis given, as for a royal boon
to beggarly outcasts in homeless vigil, to watch
where uncurtain'd behind the great windows of space
Heav'n's jewel'd company circleth unapproachably—

"Twas at sunset that I, fleeing to hide my soul
in refuge of beauty from a mortal distress,
walk'd alone with the Muse in her garden of thought,
discoursing at liberty with the mazy dreams
that came wavering pertinaciously about me; as when
the small bats, issued from their hangings, flitter o'erhead
thru' the summer twilight, with thin cries to and fro
hunting in muffled flight atween the stars and flowers.

Then fell I in hard delusion, illusion strange to tell.

(IV. 1268 ff.)

Mrs. Bridges had found him, and persuaded him to rest his sorrow by looking at some verses in a measure with which he was experimenting. In the task he had found that it would carry even the tremendous themes with which his mind was now working; and he has set down for all time the haunting picture of his own misery, in two deeply touching lines.

Yet this metre is not likely to be used after him, by any serious poet, both because of its own shortcomings and difficulties and, still more, because Bridges has made it so emphatically his own. You could not follow in his steps without appearing to imitate or even parody a poet who in my judgement is very little susceptible to either action. The originality which makes his songs and lyrics, despite their occasional—and natural and original—resemblance to Elizabethan lyrics, something which cannot be repeated or recalled lives through *The Testament of Beauty* also.

The poem is too long; but then, nearly all long poems are too long for what they have to say. The most vivid book, and the most equal in grace and accomplished quality, is also the shortest, Book I, which is followed by what I find rather a dull book.¹ The poet who took such infinite pains to make *Eros and Psyche* an artistic unity, the length of each section dictated by his scheme before it was begun and yet the allotted space so filled as to leave no feeling that it had been puffed out with poorer matter, is now not careful about ends which may be left untidy.

A worse fault lies in Bridges's own limitation of his interests and knowledge, a deliberate one. Over science and history and social customs he took immense trouble; he read them up and discussed them eagerly with friends who, he thought, understood them. But when it came to political theories and economic facts he was interested only polemically, and declined to be interested further. One of the most brilliant and imaginative passages in *The Testament of Beauty*, the astonishingly vivid and moving description of Sir Leonard Woolley's discovery of the royal tombs at Ur, is put in ostensibly because Bridges thinks that it shatters Socialism. As Mr. Nowell Smith has noted,² it is hard to see how the passage even impinges on what it is supposed to explode; however, its beauty is so great that one is glad of any reason, even a fallacious reason, that brought it to birth. But the truth is, Bridges's ideas of Socialists and Socialist aim and doctrine would have been ignorance even in Tennyson. Socialism he equated with 'the Lower Ethick', and with

¹ Bridges said that he was at pains to make the Second Book longer than the First lest readers should think his powers were flagging. But this surely illustrates what I have said of his justified feeling that he was now free of his former responsibility to make every detail perfect.

² *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

the class-hate that kindleth in disorder'd times,
when prosperity hath set envy and desire at war.

(II. 433-4.)

It was merely a preaching of civil strife and arose from a desire to lay hands on others' goods, in pursuit of which ends it was ready to destroy that individuality which he cherished so fiercely. That Socialists, some of them, might have a philosophy of their own and even some not ignoble ethics never occurred to him, for he came by his political opinions by inheritance.

Also, some day, not in our own time perhaps but in a time which is surely coming—and now is coming faster than in Bridges's life could have been ever guessed—it will seem strange that a great poet should write so noble and elaborate and comprehensive a poem on Beauty and yet practically omit the whole East. Ancient Egypt fired his imagination to write some of its finest passages, but China touched him not at all. Nor does he find in Hindu philosophy, or in Buddhism or Islam, anything to illustrate his argument, beyond the bare assertion that 'India and Egypt were seedplots of wisdom' and the wry shrewd comment:

The best part of our lives we are wanderers in Romance:
Our fathers travel'd Eastward to revel in wonders
where pyramid pagoda and picturesque attire
glow in the fading sunset of antiquity;
and now wil the Orientals make hither in return
outlandish pilgrimage: their wiseacres hav seen
the electric light i' the West, and come to worship.

(I. 588 ff.)

What seemed to him essential and great in man's history was two strands, which together made up civilization as he valued it: Christian ethic and Hellenic thought, artistry, achievement. This belief had been always with him and more than once finds expression in his prose criticism. In *The Testament of Beauty* he adds Europe's achievement in music to Christian ethic and Greek art and philosophy; in this, he admits, later ages far outdid Athens. He adds also another fulfilment, the fact that by later poets something of richness and romantic loveliness has been added to the beauty which from the Ancient World shines through all time.

It is by individual passages that Bridges's poem will live. No reader capable of recognizing poetry or imagination can fail of delight renewed constantly, or of frequent return to many of its pages. There is an exquisite Virgilian quality of atmosphere in its landscapes:

How was November's melancholy endear'd to me
 in the effigy of plowteams following and recrossing
 patiently the desolat landscape from dawn to dusk,
 as the slow-creeping ripple of their single furrow
 submerged the sodden litter of summer's festival!
 They are fled, those gracious teams; high on the headland now
 squatted, a roaring engin toweth to itself
 a beam of bolted shares, that glideth to and fro
 combing the stubbled glebe: and agriculture here,
 blotting out with such daub so rich a pictur of grace,
 hath lost as much of beauty as it hath saved in toil.

Again where reapers, bending to the ripen'd corn,
 were wont to scythe in rank and step with measured stroke,
 a shark-tooth'd chariot rampeth biting a broad way,
 and, jerking its high swindging arms around in the air,
 swoopeth the swath. Yet this queer Pterodactyl is well,
 that in the sinister torpor of the blazing day
 clicketeth in heartless mockery of swoon and sweat,
 as 'twere the salamandrine voice of all parch'd things:
 and the dry grasshopper wondering knoweth his God.

(III. 354 ff.)

The 'queer Pterodactyl' and 'dry grasshopper' are a fine example of his own characteristic half-grim humour, chuckling to himself as he remarked on some memory that amused him—as his friends must remember him doing.

He is a master of every kind of English landscape. Here are two which are widely apart in everything except their utter loveliness:

Nay, whether it be in the gay apple-orchards of May,
 when the pink bunches spread their gold hearts to the sun,
 Nor yet rude winds hav snow'd their petals to the ground;
 or when a dizzy bourdon haunteth the sweet cymes
 that droop at Lammas-tide the queenly foliage
 of a tall linden tree, where yearly by the wall
 of some long-ruin'd Abbey she remembereth her
 of glad thanksgivings and the gay choral Sabbaths,
 while in her leafy tower the languorous murmur
 floateth off heav'nward in a mellow dome of shade;—
 or when, tho' *summer hath o'erbrim'd their clammy cells*
 the shorten'd days are shadow'd with dark fears of dearth,
 bees ply the more, issuing on sultry noons to throng
 in the ivy-blooms—what time October's flaming hues
 surcharge the brooding hours, till passionat soul and sense
 blend in a rich reverie with the dying year.

(II. 345 ff.)

As when a high moon thru' the rifted wrack
gleameth upon the random of the windswept night;
or as a sunbeam softly, on early worshippers
at some rich shrine kneeling, stealeth thru' the eastern apse
and on the clouded incense and the fresco'd walls
mandeth the hush of prayer with a vaster silence,
laden as 'twere with the unheard music of the spheres;
—nay, incommunicable and beyond all compare
are the rich influences of those moments of bliss,
mocking imagination or pictured remembrance,
as a divine dream in the vaulted slumber of life.

(II. 166 ff.)

And here is a third scene, perhaps not English as he knew England: the picture of

one who wendeth lone his way
beside the watchful dykes of the flat Frisian shore,
what hour the wading tribes, that make their home and breed
numberless on the marshy polders, creep unseen
widely dispersed at feed, and silent neath the sun
the low unfeatured landscape seemeth void of life—
when without warning suddenly all the legion'd fowl
rise from their beauties' ambush in the reedy beds,
and on spredd wings with clamorous ecstasy¹
carllioning in the air manœuvre, and where they wheel
transport the broken sunlight, shoaling in the sky—
with like sudden animation the fair fields of France
gave birth to myriad poets and singers unknown,
who in a main flight gathering their playful flock
settled in Languedoc, on either side the Rhone
within the court and county of Raymond of Toulouse.

Nor wer these Troubadours hucksters of song.

(III. 617 ff.)

At least once he escapes clean away from the European scene, and makes us regret that he did not oftener trust his imagination to describe what he did not intimately know through his eyes. This is in the tropical night in which 'old Methusaleh' is seen, such a glimpse of imaginative mythology set on vast dark seas as Milton might have given us:

sailors caught by storm
on the wide Indian Ocean at shift of the monsoon,
hav seen in the dark night a giant swimmer's head

¹ An ordinary five-foot line like this is very rare in this position—in the middle of a paragraph.

that on the sequent billows trailing silvery hair
at every lightning flash reappeareth in place,
out-riding the tempest, as a weather-bound barque
anchor'd in open roadstead lifteth at the seas.

(II. 633 ff.)

But the incidental felicities are innumerable, and noteworthy for many and different reasons. Here is the finest descriptive passage of all, unsurpassed by Bridges anywhere and therefore unsurpassed by any English poet. But notable also because it is the passage which shows most unmistakably the influence of his friend Gerard Hopkins, at last accepted fully and thrust forth into fresh beauty; it is the only passage outside Hopkins which in something very near to his own manner equals his own astounding fusion of vision and imagination.

The sky's unresting cloudland, that with varying play
sifteth the sunlight thru' its figured shades, that now
stand in massiv range, cumulated stupendous
mountainous snowbillowy up-piled in dazzling sheen,
Now like sailing ships on a calm ocean drifting,
Now scatter'd wispy waifs, that neath the eager blaze
disperse in air; Or now parcelling the icy inane
highspredd in fine diaper of silver and mother-of-pearl
freaking the intense azure; Now scurrying close o'erhead,
wild ink-hued random racers that fling sheeted rain
gustily, and with garish bows laughing o'erarch the land:
Or, if the spirit of storm be abroad, huge molten glooms
mount on the horizon stealthily, and gathering as they climb
deep-freighted with live lightning, thunder and drenching flood
rebuff the winds, and with black-purpling terror impend
til they be driven away, when grave Night peacefully
clearing her heav'nly rondure of its turbid veils
layeth bare the playthings of Creation's babyhood;
and the immortal fireballs of her uttermost space
twinkle like friendly rushlights on the countryside.

(I. 277 ff.)

The picture of the giant king swimming on monsoon seas shows, as I have said, his mythopoeic powers. Here is a passage of still quiet loveliness which shows these in other fashion: the face of a landscape as the myth takes form before our eyes, promontory and sea and sky rising into anthropomorphic shape:

Long had the homing bees plunder'd the thymy flanks
of famed Hymettus harvesting their sweet honey:
agelong the dancing waves had lapp'd the Ægean isles
and promontories of the blue Ionian shore

—where in her Mediterranean mirror gazing
old Asia's dreamy face wrinkleth to a westward smile.¹

(I. 653 ff.)

For individual touches, there are few who will forget the 'sloven toad in his dark hole' (I. 217)²: or our sorrows which 'leak away' until their seeds shrivel 'too thin to lodge in Memory's hustled sieve' (I. 199 ff.); or St. Francis 'cumber'd with servility' (I. 237);³ or the valleys 'vocal with angelic rilling of rocky streams' (I. 313); the felicity of his literal use of the adjective 'shapely', of the trees that are 'black shapely skeletons standing in snow' (I. 309).

His wit, always at least slightly sardonic, shows in his smile at
the old Ecclesiast
pseudo-Solomon, who cryeth in the wilderness,
calling all to baptism in the Slough of Despond.

(II. 527 ff.)

Another passage, masterly as a picture and also subtly true as psychology, suggests that perhaps he was not as completely blind to Bunyan's merits as he once seemed:

Sometimes when slowly from the deep sleep of fatigue
a man awakeneth, he lyeth for awhile amazed,
aware of self and of his rested body, and yet
knowing not where he is, bewilder'd, unable
to interpret sight or sound, because the slumbering guards
in Memory's Castle hav' lag'g'd at his summons
for to let down the drawbridge and to uplift the gate:
Anon with their deliverance he cometh again
to usual cognisance of the things about him,
life, and all his old familiar concepts of home.³

(II. 304 ff.)

Even more memorable than its full, constantly springing beauty is the poem's wisdom. Repeatedly we come on passages which ever afterwards linger in memory for their ethical insight and depth, lit up by personal revelation and reminiscence. Some of these I have quoted already; how astonishing they are! Such a passage as this:

Or as I well remember one highday in June
bright on the seaward South-downs, where I had come afar
on a wild garden planted years ago, and fenced
thickly within live-beechen walls: the season it was
of prodigal gay blossom, and man's skill had made
a fair-order'd husbandry of thatt nativ' pleasaunce:

¹ The reader will note his very occasional use of external rhyming: 'isle' and 'smile'.

² 'Sloven' was not in the first text.

³ The reader will not miss the recollection of Wordsworth in this passage.

But had ther been no more than earth's wild loveliness,
 the blue sky and soft air and the unmown flowersprent lawns,
 I would have lain me down and long'd, as then I did,
 to lie there ever indolently undisturb'd, and watch
 the common flowers that starr'd the fine grass of the wold,
 waving in gay display their gold-heads to the sun,
 each telling of its own incontinent happiness,
 each type a faultless essence of God's will, such gems
 as magic master-minds in painting or music
 threw aside once for man's regard or disregard;
 things supreme in themselves, eternal, unnumber'd
 in the unexplored necessities of Life and Love.

(I. 19 ff.)

If I had to choose two lines as the greatest he ever wrote, it would be those last two, which seem to me among the greatest ever written and deserving of constant contemplation.

Sometimes, as Milton did, he wondered if an age too cold or clime too damp had come to make his poem too late:

But I in England starving neath the unbroken glooms
 of thatt dreariest November which wrapping the sun,
 damping all life, had robb'd my poem of the rays
 whose wealth so far had sped it, I long'd but to be
 i' the sunshine with my history; and the names that held
 place in my heart and now

(he says with a wrench of engaging wilfulness and rebellion)

shall hav place in my line
 wer Avignon, Belcaire, Montélimar, Narbonne,
 Béziers, Castelnaudary, Béarn and Carcasone.

(III. 668 ff.)

But his poem had not been left until too late. As perhaps the passage which stays longest in memory, a perennial sunset in the mind, tells us, it was begun when a most amazing renewal of freshness and delight had found the old poet.

"Twas late in my long journey, when I had clomb to where
 the path was narrowing and the company few,
 a glow of childlike wonder enthrall'd me, as if my sense
 had come to a new birth purified, my mind enrapt
 re-awakening to a fresh initiation of life;
 with like surprise of joy as any man may know
 who rambling wide hath turn'd, resting on some hill-top
 to view the plain he has left, and see'th it now out-spredd

mapp'd at his feet, a landscape so by beauty estranged
he scarce wil ken familiar haunts, nor his own home,
maybe, where far it lieth, small as a faded thought. . . .

To such a mood I had come, by what charm I know not,
where on thatt upland path I was pacing alone;
and yet was nothing new to me, only all was vivid
and significant that had been dormant or dead:
as if in a museum the fossils on their shelves
should come to life suddenly, or a winter rose-bed
burst into crowded holiday of scent and bloom.
I felt the domination of Nature's secret urge,
and happy escape therein; as when in boyhood once
from the rattling workshops of a great factory
conducted into the engine-room I stood in face
of the quiet driving power, that fast in nether cave
seated, set all the floors a-quiver, a thousand looms
throbbing and jennies dancing; and I felt at heart
a kinship with it and sympathy, as children wil
with amicable monsters.

(I. 8 ff.)

I had intended to make some examination of the changes between the first privately printed text and the final text. But, though fairly numerous, they were mostly not important; he was ceasing to fuss about small matters. Slightly more interesting perhaps is the fact that his spelling—in which, as I have said, he was far from consistent and by which he raised an unnecessary misunderstanding of much of his work—conformed closer to accepted usage in the earlier draft. There was more of caprice, and less of principle, in what he did than Bridges thought, and his prose will never reach the public which it merits until it is issued in the type and spelling which are used for his verse.

Some of the influences on *The Testament of Beauty* Bridges made plain enough: his deliberate debt to Plato and Aristotle, the resemblance between the former's *Ideas* and his own *Essences*. Earlier Greek thinkers than Plato contributed the stress which the poem lays on Necessity as a motive force. The influence of Gerard Hopkins and of St. Augustine's *Confessions* I have noted. But there was also, I think, an influence we should hardly have expected to find, that of Newman. Bridges's use of Conscience, as Mr. Nowell Smith has pointed out, is in the meaning of 'that knowledge which is in us'. But also, in passages of *The Testament of Beauty* there is a recollection of Conscience as something infinitely more august, of 'Conscience, that aboriginal Vicar of Christ in the soul, a prophet in its informations, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, a monarch in its peremptoriness'.

XIII

EPILOGUE

The Testament of Beauty was published on his eighty-fifth birthday. It astonished the literary world. Amazement was felt that a writer who had passed his eightieth year should have compassed anything on so grand a scale and composed with so unflagging a vigour. It was a conquest over time such as the world's history could hardly parallel. Also, it smashed the opinion which was far too prevalent, that he was a poet who wrote about Greek deities and produced airy graceful lyrics which no doubt were all very well in their way but did not concern the common man. His success surprised and delighted him; it was a fitting crown to his splendid and fruitful life.

His last letter to me, written on Christmas Day 1929, set down attractively his half-amused gratification. 'My poem has had an incredible boom and sale: it ran very quickly into 5 figures, and is still running. Philosophers have been more indulgent than I expected, & reviewers say it is so poetical and instructive that I am almost coming to wish to read it myself.'

I was then in America, to which I had travelled on crutches; in 1929 I broke my leg, and for some years was in and out of operating theatres and hospitals. I am going to do myself the honour of quoting a little further from this last letter of his, for it shows how vivid and kind his sympathy was always, and how little thought he had of his own comfort. Bridges had heard what was, unfortunately, a mistaken report that my bones had knit, and he wrote immediately:

I have been rejoiced to hear of your recovery—I mean your leg's recovery—for I was seriously anxious about it, and I shd. not have been surprised if the American surgeons had confiscated the end of it. You did not treat it with the considerate care that it deserved from the author of its misfortune . . . but all's well that ends well—and I marvel at you and wish that I cd. take my bodily disasters & pains with such courage—my organs are playing the devil with me.

As to my own supposed fortitude, of which he speaks, that was nothing to the point. My accident had been due to shocking carelessness and wilfulness, and from first to last the only thought present in my mind—the only feeling which it would have been proper to have—was of the immense bother to which my fault had put others, who never spoke of it.

But Bridges's troubles were a very different matter, and how lightly he touched on them! *The Testament of Beauty*, as he told his friends, had drained his strength as nothing before it had done, and in the last nine months of his life he suffered from an internal haemorrhage, from which he knew he was dying. Yet even now he would not admit physical infirmity. 'I have known him', says Kenneth Sisam, 'even when he was very ill enter this room¹ at a run.' One remembers that sudden swift entrance—as one remembers his other characteristic poses: flat on the soil or leaning back in a chair, his arms and legs knotted and contorted in the most surprising fashion, arms twisted around his head and knees high-crossed, his broad-brimmed irremovable hat still where it was when he came in: or kneeling in his garden, against his loved rockery, as he weeded it: or working with those delicate long fingers at the tapestry he did so skilfully.

But he was now failing and knew it. He went over old drafts of *The Testament of Beauty*, asked friends who were within reach to return, if they had kept them, letters he had written to them: he destroyed all that was really not relevant to the work for which he had lived, which was all that he wished to leave as memorial that he had lived: he got ready for what he knew was coming.

He died at Chilswell, 21 April 1930. Mrs. Bridges wrote to me, 6 June, 'We had known for some weeks that he was not well, but he was mostly up and about and was strolling in the garden and enjoying the sunshine and the beginnings of spring only ten days before the end'.

'There's no chance', wrote Sir Henry Newbolt, 'of another R.B. coming my way or anybody's way. The mould is broken; that's certain. But what an endless giving of thanks for the whole plan of his departure—the dramatic change from extreme neglect to a sudden rush of popularity, and then the quick harvest home journey on the top of his sheaves—it couldn't have been better done—it satisfied every wish.'²

The mould was broken. 'At once aristocratic and unconventional, virile and affectionate, fearlessly inquiring and profoundly religious'³—as we have seen, profoundly and unshakenly traditional yet individual and fresh in opinion and outlook—Bridges was the last of our poets who were poets only, and nothing else. Others of his contemporaries were from necessity miscellaneous men of letters or propagandists and preachers; he was able to live only for the poetry to which he had

¹ At the Oxford University Press, his favourite haunt in the city.

² *The Later Life and Letters of Sir Henry Newbolt*, p. 363.

³ Nowell C. Smith, *The Times*, 22 April 1930.

dedicated himself so long ago, when a boy at Eton. He used his good fortune as a means to the end for which he cared, with steadfast integrity and awareness of what he was doing:

I will be what God made me, nor protest
Against the bent of genius in my time,
That science of my friends robs all the best,
While I love beauty, and was born to rhyme.

He went his own way. 'I am not interested in the British poets,' he told H. M. Margoliouth. It was true—of course, with qualifications. No poet, as we have seen, ever bothered less about his contemporaries. Tennyson's merits, especially in his earlier works, he knew, but Tennyson was not among his favourite authors. We have seen what he thought of Browning. 'Take Browning,' he once observed to me. 'They tell you now that he was a great thinker—whereas *I* say—that you could not get a better example—of a *perfectly confused* mind.' *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* he considered 'the only things of Arnold that were any good'. In some of his judgements there may seem an element of caprice—there certainly was one of conversational heightening and simplifying—but there was always, from his own exceptionally integrated manner of judging, a basis of sound sense. Of Shelley he wrote to me, in 1913, that he had intended to follow up his study of Milton's prosody by one of 'poetic form', using Shelley as text, but found that he could not do this without analysing Shelley's metaphysic, which was 'too childish or unconsidered for serious treatment'.

Bridges, with a pause at Keats, went right back to Milton as his master. This kind of thing is not uncommon in antiquity, when a poet to find a kindred spirit might have to look across a gulf of sterile centuries, as Spenser looked back to Chaucer and Dante to Vergil, but I know of no parallel modern example. Satire and social criticism in verse he found uninteresting. With a brief stay at Shakespeare, after Milton, Bridges travelled further still, to Dante; then to the Latin poets and the later Greek poets, the idyllists rather than the dramatists and Homer (though these, of course, he knew and valued). Next to Milton, perhaps the chief poetic influence on his work was Heine's lyrics, which he read often and with delight, and Dante. He deliberately recalled the opening of *The Divine Comedy* in the beautiful opening of *The Testament of Beauty*, and it was Dante's master Vergil who indicated the tone and rich atmosphere of its lovely autumnal and landscape passages. You see what Bridges picked out as belonging to him: feeling (not too deep and passionate, but sincere and limpid), the imaginative possession of a country

and the skies above it, the rivers which ran through it, its eternal unageing life, its music, especially its natural music. For all his learning and knowledge of many authors in many tongues, he is a strangely 'unliterary' poet, very much of the open air and very little of the study.

That in his writing which belonged solely to his own age, and especially to the comparatively small and sheltered group to which he belonged, had an old-fashioned and unreal appearance even when he wrote. There is this perishable stuff in the work of every poet; but with no poet is less damage done by its presence, for it affects so slight a proportion of Bridges's work and shreds away so easily. It does not touch by far the greater proportion of verse and prose, it never enters the enchanted world of his lyrics, it falls clean outside the landscapes and reveries of *The Testament of Beauty*. Bridges's opinions were not allowed for one moment to cloud his noble homage and awareness of Milton's greatness, though if any poet might have been expected to be obnoxious to him on religious and political grounds it was Milton. They did not affect his tender and understanding study of the courageous and deeply imaginative achievement of Keats.

We do not know what posterity will find worth preserving from our times when we ourselves have sunk into silence, but I do know that Bridges's work will be a large part of what will endure, and he did so many things—in such different kinds—supremely well. Poems like *The Growth of Love* and *Eros and Psyche* to our own tormented age may seem to belong to a finished order, which will never return. But artistic minds will always value what is perfectly done. Beauty is always 'its own excuse for being', and they are of one texture of grace throughout. Poets who care for their craft will never make any mistake about the sudden doors which Bridges flung wide open when he published his studies of Milton's prosody and Keats's *Hyperion*. Above all, there remain the faultless and infinitely varied lyrics, in which no effect, however successful, is copied or repeated but a constant enrichment and change is won out of a language which was already centuries old, so that the verse never fails of new beauty and freshness; and there is *The Testament of Beauty*. And, so long as men care for letters and integrity of character, there is the image left on the English mind for ever of his grave selfless service to truth and loveliness, of his vivid and faithful record of a land which has moved many besides her own sons to reverence and love. It is not easy to convey to those who never knew him the affection and respect which every thought of Robert Bridges recalls.

Of his own supremely thankful and rich and happy life Bridges has left his own perfect statement:

FORTUNATUS NIMIUM

I have lain in the sun
I have toil'd as I might
I have thought as I would
And now it is night.

My bed full of sleep
My heart of content
For friends that I met
The way that I went.

I welcome fatigue
While frenzy and care
Like thin summer clouds
Go melting in air.

To dream as I may
And awake when I will
With the song of the birds
And the sun on the hill.

Or death—were it death—
To what should I wake
Who loved in my home
All life for its sake?

What good have I wrought?
I laugh to have learned
That joy cannot come
Unless it be earned:

For a happier lot
Than God giveth me
It never hath been,
Nor ever shall be.

APPENDIX

CHANGES IN THE TEXT OF *THE GROWTH OF LOVE*

BRIDGES left a few manuscript notes on this sequence, which he allowed Mr. Kenneth Sisam to copy. By the latter's courtesy I can show something of the sifting process by which *The Growth of Love* came to its present form.

The first publication, in 1876, was of 24 sonnets. Thirteen of these escaped later elimination, and still exist as approved by their author; as numbered in the final text, they are 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, 28, 31, 40, 54, 56, 58, and 59. Some of them rank with the finest; and one of them, 23, is that which I myself would pick out as the loveliest single poem of the sequence:

O weary pilgrims, chanting of your woe,
That turn your eyes to all the peaks that shine,
Hailing in each the citadel divine
The which ye thought to have enter'd long ago;
Until at length your feeble steps and slow
Falter upon the threshold of the shrine,
And your hearts overburden'd doubt in fine
Whether it be Jerusalem or no:

Dishearten'd pilgrims, I am one of you;
For, having worshipp'd many a barren face,
I scarce now greet the goal I journey'd to:
I stand a pagan in the holy place;
Beneath the lamp of truth I am found untrue,
And question with the God that I embrace.

Of other sonnets in the final sequence, 41 appeared first in Bridges's earliest volume of verse, in 1873. 'Some others appeared in two pamphlets printed when I was in London. The series was completed gradually and sent to the Rev. C. Daniel to be printed on 25 February 1883.'¹

Bridges cast away sonnets of which many poets would have been proud. In especial, I am sorry that he rejected no. 20 (79 in the 1889 edition) of the original 24, the one beginning 'Who praiseth? If the poet have not known'. Like nearly all that he wrote, it contains lines which bear the stamp of his style and manner of thinking: 'The learned fancies of a thousand years.' Yet he doubtless felt that these were also

¹ The Daniel Press, Oxford.

like thousands of lines which other accomplished poets have written with ease, and he did not care to preserve what possessed qualities which were widely shared. Another fine sonnet which has gone is the one which begins (37 in the 1889 edition) 'Already have we sailed far out to sea': but the reasons for this rejection are plain enough. For a fastidious poet its rhymes were far too easy. Finer yet, and lacking this flaw, is another rejected sonnet, 'The bliss that Adam lost—eating in haste'.

In most cases it is not hard to understand why a sonnet was suppressed. Of the 1889 edition, sonnets 42 and 49 are weak, yet the latter ('I will not marry thee, sweet Hope—I said') contains these lines:

The cold star on his shining orbit home
With all his valleys dry, his verdure dead.

But Bridges of course knew that 'cold' was a favourite adjective of his, especially as applied to starlight or moonlight. It imperils the acceptance of the best if the second-best is shown up alongside it.

Nos. 54, 56, 61 are also not strong sonnets, though written with the fluent ease of the poet who is finding his own individual way, by experiment and rejection. It was because of this too much ease that I believe they were flung away; for, except in lyric, where he must have known that his work was essentially new and altogether his own, Bridges more and more distrusted work which had this quality. He could always, if he wished, write such lines as

I crave
A loan of time that flies beyond recall.

But so could many poets and some mere versifiers. You note the trick in others and catch it—which is why it was long conviction that was behind his remark to me, in 1914, 'The better a poet writes now the worse he writes'. Chiefly, I think, he rejected the sonnets I have named because, in manner, diction, and thought, they were like so much Elizabethan writing. Similarly, 62, 'Sweet sleep, dear unadornéd bride of toil', is excellent. But the Elizabethans wrote so much about sleep that the theme was overdue for a rest.

Bridges's first printed form is nearly always so good that later changes are few and generally slight. They are almost always changes which tighten and stiffen the sense and, especially, deepen and strengthen the rhythm, which he seems to have felt was weakened by Elizabethan fluency and flaccidity. For example, no. 1, that perfect opening of the sequence (a position it attained gradually; it is 13 in the 1889 text), has its original flawed and somewhat tagged final couplet,

Behold me now free from the care that stains
And master of the art I chose to serve

changed into the superb confident claim:

Behold me, now that I have cast my chains,
Master of the art which for thy sake I serve.

The sonnet which follows:

my strength is freed
In measure, grace and motion as I will

has a stately sufficiency and is adequate. But it gains by the revision which made its final shape like a skilful manipulation of muscle by the mind's resolution:

my strength is freed
In delicate ordination as I will.

Take a sonnet (no. 8) which is almost a prophecy of the theme of his last work, *The Testament of Beauty*, and as such is cited by all commentators on that poem. The gain is great when

man hath sped his instinct to outgo
Nature in sound and shape, and daily frames
Much for himself to countervail his shames

passes into the final phrasing:

man hath sped his instinct to outgo
The step of science; and against her shames
Imagination stakes out heavenly claims.

Two sonnets, 16 and 19, which have survived from the earliest collection, have been rewritten into what are almost new poems.

I conclude with two more examples of changes. The first is interesting as a flash of autobiographical and topographical information: sonnet 38:

An idle June day on the sunny Thames,
Floating or rowing as our fancy led,
Now in the high beams basking as we sped,
Now in green shade gliding by mirror'd stems;
By lock and weir and isle, and many a spot
Of memoried pleasure, glad with strength and skill,
Friendship, good wine, and mirth, that serve not ill
The heavenly Muse, tho' she requite them not.

Lines 3–8 were originally:

Now listening to sweet things the young birds said
 And choosing now a nosegay from the gems,
 That star the embroidery of the bank that hems
 The current that our skiff from Henley sped
 To where the Cliefden woods o'er Maidenhead
 Bar its still surface with their mirrored stems.

Few readers will not feel that these lines are what his work hardly ever is; that is, bad in the way that minor verse is bad. The rhymes are tags, the syntax trips over the repeated 'that', the diction is sentimental.

My other citation is from 53, the grand sonnet which begins 'I heard great Hector sounding war's alarms':

But on those gentle meads where nothing harms
 And purpose perishes, his passion glowed
 Like the cold night-worm's candle, nor scarce shewed
 The heart death kills not quite nor Lethe charms.

That lovely phrase, 'the cold night-worm's candle', occurs in both versions. But the final text sheds some awkwardness, and gives us in 'weary oblivion' the sense of utter frustration as the verse seems to stretch itself out in a rhythmic gesture of exhaustion and despair:

But on those gentle meads, which Lethe charms
 With weary oblivion, his passion glow'd
 Like the cold night-worm's candle, and only show'd
 Such mimic flame as neither heats nor harms.

Yet the changes have not brought all gain. I am sorry to lose

where nothing harms
 And purpose perishes.

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